



PERCY VERE
Evelyn Everett-Green

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"MAIDIE LOOKED ROUND AND GAVE A LITTLE CRY
OF JOY."

PERCY VERE

BY

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PERCY VERE

CHAPTER I.

ON SHIPBOARD.

“THAT’S rather a jolly-looking little kid!”

Percy stood beside his particular friend, the third officer on board the great Cape liner, watching the passengers from Madeira come on board. His straw hat was set well back upon his yellow mop of curls, which the ship’s barber had not cropped as close as Percy preferred. His face was very brown and his dancing eyes were very blue. He stood with his feet well apart, his hands thrust into the pockets of his blue knickerbockers, and an air of importance and command which he had unconsciously copied

from the ship's officers, into whose company he had been much thrown for the past fortnight.

The "little kid" whom he had honoured by his approving notice was a small girl all in white—and a white of the finest and daintiest texture—who was skipping merrily up the ship's side from the boat which had brought her from shore. A cloud of dusky brown hair floated round her, and her big dark eyes, which roved eagerly about, were shaded by the longest and silkiest of black lashes. Everything she wore, except her long tan-silk stockings and little tan shoes, was spotless white; and her face was like a rose-leaf in its delicate pink and white tinting. But what attracted Percy was that the little lady was always laughing. She laughed when the boat tossed her up towards the long companion ladder, and then sank with her just before she could make her spring. She laughed back at her mother, when on the next lift of the boat she sprang out, assisted by many strong hands; she

was laughing still as she tripped onwards to the level of the lower deck ; and next minute she and Percy were looking each other in the face with the frank curiosity and good-fellowship of childhood.

“ Like to see over the old tub ? ” asked Percy, with amiable intent. “ I’ll show you, if you like.”

The little maiden drew herself up with a small assumption of childish dignity, cast a look back towards the boat where her mother, her nurse, and sundry other individuals, who might or might not belong to her party, still remained, and seemed as though they might be some while in embarking ; and then she gave another look at Percy, cast her eyes round the big vessel, after which she smiled suddenly and graciously.

“ I don’t think it’s quite polite to call it an old tub. It’s a very fine boat—they all say so. That’s why Mother chose it. But you can show it to me, if you like, boy. Do you belong to it ? ”

“No such luck! Wish I did! It’s an awfully jolly sort of life. I want Captain Clarke to take me on as cabin-boy or anything, but he won’t. Says I’ve got to go to some rotten school in England. Beastly hard luck, I call it—being sent away from all the fun at home to grind at books. Fellows always call England home; but I don’t think it’ll feel much like home to me.”

“Where do you live, then, boy?”

“Out in West Australia—got a big sheep and cattle run, my father has. Awful fun there! Can’t think why he wouldn’t let me stop there!”

“But this boat doesn’t come from Australia.”

“Right oh, young wiseacre! I’ve been to the Cape for three months with an uncle. I’d very well have liked to stop there with him; but they’re bent on sending me over to England. Beastly hard luck, I call it. I never did cotton to books, and I guess I’m a bit too old to change now.”

“How old are you?”

“Twelve next birthday.”

“Well, I think you’re not too old to learn to be wiser,” spoke the little lady with an air of quaint dignity and patronage, “and boys like being at school when they’re used to it. All my brothers are at school. Sometimes I wish I could go with them when the holidays are over.”

“By Jove! Is that so? Well, I can’t say I’ve cottoned to the notion yet, but I may take hold still. No, don’t you go that side; they’ve not done coaling, and you’ll get all over black smuts. Scoot up this companion, and I’ll show you the saloons and things; but if you came out here from England you pretty well know what it’s like, perhaps?”

“We came out in my uncle’s steam-yacht. I’ve never seen a great, big, monstrous boat like this. How do you know your way about, boy? Everything looks alike, and different, and so funny. I shall

always be getting lost ! Where does that long passage lead to ? ”

“ To the second-class saloon and cabins ; we’ll come along up higher still, and I’ll show you the first class, where you’ll belong. Have you got upper-deck cabins ? I expect you have. Steward told me some swells were coming on here, and wanted A 1 of everything. Expect that was you.”

The child laughed.

“ How funnily you talk, boy ! Is that because you’re Australian ? Show me what an upper-deck cabin is like, please. And what do you mean by A 1 ? ”

“ Oh, that’s what it’s called because it’s top price, you know. Come on ; I’ll show you. Awfully jolly little holes they are—open right upon the deck. I’ve got one myself. It was booked for another fellow and his man, but he was too ill at the last to get off, so the steward shoved me in all by myself. You can have the door open at night, and hear them swabbing decks ;

and I can hear ship's bells, too. I'll teach you them, if you like. It's a bit muddling at first, but you soon get to understand. They change like the watches, every four hours. Come on ; I'll show you."

When, some half-hour later, Lady Madeline Grey went in search of her mercurial little daughter, whom every ship's officer had seen in company with the boy, and they all averred he would take good care of her, she found the pair upon the upper deck, in a somewhat secluded corner, seemingly in rather excited argument.

"It's a beastly name!" insisted the boy.

"It's not ; it's a very pretty name. You ought to like it. Percy is pretty——"

"Too namby-pamby. Ought to be a girl's name—not a boy's."

"And Vere is quite pretty—prettier than Grey a great deal."

"Vere would be all right alone, but Percy Vere—well, I only wish you knew what it was like to be called so."

“ But I don’t understand.”

Lady Madeline came forward smiling, and laid a hand upon her little daughter’s shoulder. She was such a beautiful lady—tall and slender like some graceful lily—and dressed with an exquisite taste, that Percy snatched off his hat instinctively, feeling as though he was in the presence of a princess at least.

“ Don’t you understand, Maidie ? ” questioned the mother with a smile that travelled from one child-face to the other. “ I think I understand what Percy means, yet it is not always a bad thing to have a name to live up to; you know, Percy; and if perseverance is not such a dashing quality as some we could speak of, yet nothing gets on in the world without it, and nothing great is ever achieved except by those who not only fight brilliantly but persevere steadily.”

Little Maidie went off into a sudden peal of silvery laughter, clapping her hands delightedly.

“ Oh ! now I understand. Percy Vere—persevere ! How funny ! And I expect you are a lazy, harum-scarum boy like Roddy—always beginning things and never finishing. Oh, Percy Vere—Percy Vere ! ” And she shook her finger at him with a sort of saucy admonition.

The boy flushed, and his blue eyes gleamed ; but it was not needful for him to speak, because Lady Madeline intervened.

“ Maidie, dear, that is not quite a nice return to make to Percy for his kindness to you. Come, dear, now, and see your cabin. Perhaps Percy will have some tea with us on deck when we weigh anchor. The steward is going to bring us some.”

“ Oh, thanks,” answered Percy, a little uncertainly ; “ I don’t quite know what I shall be doing then.” And he walked off with his hands in his pockets and his head in the air, divided in mind as to whether Maidie Grey was the “ jolly little kid ” he

had thought her first, or a "rather cheeky little bit of goods, who wanted taking down a peg."

Madeira being the only port of call between the Cape and England, Percy was interested to watch the divers in the boats, who were still trying to induce passengers to fling bits of silver money into the green water for them to dive after and pick up. There were whole boatloads, too, of wicker-work goods, chairs and baskets, sofas and tables, being stacked on board. Passengers were buying specimens from the vendors or watching to see that their purchases made upon shore had come safely to the vessel. There was much chattering going on below in Portuguese, and above in broken English. Percy found it all very amusing to watch, and was so engrossed in his observations that he gave a little jump when a voice at his side said, ingratiatingly :

"Let me stand by you and see them, Percy. I want to see if the 'Bit-Man'

comes with our things himself. Do you know what a 'bit' is ? ”

Percy shook his head, but condescended to smile at Maidie. She took out a small silver coin and showed it him.

“ It's worth about fourpence, and they call it a 'bit.' Everything is reckoned by 'bits' in Madeira. And one of the basket and chair shops is kept by the 'Bit-Man,' as he calls himself. He speaks English very well, and he's very nice. He said he should come himself with our things. Mother bought such a lot. Oh, I do believe I see him down there ! ”

It was quite exciting seeing all Lady Madeline's wicker-work brought on board ; and the 'Bit-Man' came smilingly up to say a respectful farewell to the little white fairy from England, who had been such a good customer.

“ I'm so sorry we're going,” spoke the child ; “ we've had the loveliest winter out here. Did you land, Percy ? Did you go

up to the Mount and come down in a running-carro ? Isn't it just delicious ? I had a run in one almost every day."

"What—that toboggan business, with the fellows pulling and running ? Rather ! I went up twice, once on a horse and once on the train, for the lark of coming down that fashion. Hurst took me—he's the third officer ; awfully smart chap, and no end jolly to me. Have you been here all the winter ? "

"Yes. Mother got rather ill in October, and they said she ought to spend a winter somewhere where it's always warm, so she came here, and brought me with her. Now we're going home. I like that, but I'm sorry to leave Madeira. We did have such fun, and I had scarcely any lessons."

Percy laughed ; a note of good-fellowship seemed struck.

"So you don't care for lessons so mighty much yourself ? "

"I learnt a little Portuguese," hastily

remarked Maidie. "*Mal rapage* means 'naughty boy.' I often had to say that. Oh, what a noise that thing does make! Is it a siren, do you say? I thought a siren was a sort of mermaid, who sang beautifully. I don't think anybody would come nearer to hear this siren's noise. Does it mean we're going?"

The children stood side by side as the huge vessel slowly glided out from the anchorage, and set her bows eastward upon the homeward course. The green, flower-decked island became less distinct, as the *Egerton Castle* skirted round it, and then swept northward at full steam.

The two children could not remain long over their tea, though Percy was hungry from having missed his lunch on board. They must always be running to see what they were passing, and how far Madeira looked. Maidie heaved quite a sigh when she kissed her hand to the island as it faded away in the distance, and Percy asked a sudden question :

“Where do you live in England?”

“Our house is called Beech Hurst.”

“Is it a big, grand sort of place?”

“It’s pretty big. Daddy has a lot of land all about. He’s got other houses that other people live in, you know. He’s lord of the manor, and he’s a magistrate and a lot of other things. That’s why he couldn’t come with Mother. He’s so many things to do always.”

“Is it quite in the country, or do you have a town near?”

“Oh, there’s a town—it’s about five miles away. It is called Writlington, and people can get from London there in about two hours. Why do you look like that, Percy?”

“Why, because it’s so queer. I suppose it’s because England’s such a little bit of a place. But the school I’m going to is close to Writlington!”

“Is it? How very funny! It must be Dr. Dormer’s, then.”

“That’s the name of the old Johnny. Say, young ’un, do you know him? What sort of an old bloke is he?”

“He’s very nice at garden parties and things,” answered Maidie, “but I don’t know much about him. Roddy wanted to go there, but Daddy wouldn’t have it. He said it was too near home; so he was sent off after the other two. Roddy and I would have liked him to be there. Then he could have come home for the Sundays.”

Percy’s face brightened up as he took this in.

“Then if I’m at old Dormer’s school I’ll see you sometimes?”

It seemed to bring them somewhat nearer together, this thought that Percy’s destination was so near to Maidie’s home. The acquaintance begun by chance upon the big liner might possibly be prolonged when they reached shore. Percy’s idea about school began to undergo some transition. He had been struggling against a sense of coming

isolation—the thought of being cast amongst a colony of strange boys, who would not understand his ways, nor he theirs; who might look down upon him for his colonial training, whilst perhaps he secretly despised them for their insular ignorances and limitations. He had pictured himself as something of an Ishmaelite in the new world to which destiny, in the shape of the big liner, was carrying him. Now suddenly it seemed as though a kindly fate or Providence had thrown him across the track of friends when he least expected it.

Maidie was quite excited.

“Mother, Mother! isn’t it funny? What do you think? Percy is going to Dr. Dormer’s school! He’s going to be one of the ‘dormice,’ as the boys call them. Only I don’t think Percy will be caught napping very often. And, Mother, we can have him to Beech Hurst to spend his *exeats*, can’t we? Percy has no friends in England.”

Lady Madeline looked into her little daughter's eager face and smiled. After all, she was a mother first and a lady of high social position afterwards. The lonely little boy from the other side of the world, be he who he might on the social side, was a small human waif, alone in the wide world ; and she looked at him very sweetly, as he stood a little way off, half hesitating what to say. For Percy had a dim idea that Lady Madeline must be in England a very grand lady indeed, and he had a certain inborn pride which held him back from trying to push himself into her world, where perhaps he had no real right to be. His father was a big landowner out yonder ; but he worked hard himself, and never held aloof from any task that his men were engaged in. That seemed to Percy the right way of doing things out yonder ; but in England he had an idea that life might be different.

He came forward now, putting on his

most manly air, as he took the lady's extended white hand, and said, "Oh, thanks awfully. It'll be very jolly thinking that you are rather near ; but I'm not going to be a nuisance to anybody. I expect I'll have lots to do at old Dormer's, and there'll be all the fellows to get to know. I shan't have time to be dull ; so you won't have to bother over me."

Lady Madeline smiled, and drew Percy a little nearer to her. She read the unspoken thought in his mind, and she felt that here was a boy of some force of character and perception. She liked him for his independence and courage, and she laid no embargo on Maidie's friendship, which had four whole days in which to ripen before they would reach Southampton.

Lady Madeline was not herself a good sailor, and though the passage was a smooth one, she seldom left her cabin, but remained quietly there, with the child running in and out through the open door, not too ill to

enjoy her prattle, but finding it best to remain quiet and recumbent.

So Percy was left to do the honours of the vessel for Maidie. He took her under his protection at meal times, rescuing her from her nurse and the "children's table," where otherwise she would have fed, and bringing her to the captain's table, where he had been promoted to sit, and where he insisted that she was also to be accommodated.

Percy was travelling under the charge of Captain Clarke, who was a friend of his Cape Town uncle; and he was on the most friendly terms with all the ship's officers and stewards. So Maidie found herself quite a little queen amongst the grown-ups, and rose to the occasion with great dignity. She felt it was extremely fortunate that she and Percy had met thus early, and that some link already bound them together. She was never tired of telling him about Beech Hurst, or of hearing him tell of his own far-away home.

“ I’ll tell you what,” she said one day, as they were nearing the shores of England: “ you shall come and stop with us at Beech Hurst now, and then some time, when I’m older and can do as I like, we’ll go off to Australia and see your home, and I’ll stay there with you. That would be nice, wouldn’t it? And you’d show me all the funny things you talk about, as I’ll show you everything you want to see at home.”

Percy laughed, and agreed that this would be famous ; but in his heart of hearts he felt doubtful as to the invitation to Beech Hurst of which Maidie spoke so glibly. The captain was going to take him and put him under the care of Dr. Dormer on landing, and after that—well, they would have to see what happened next.

But fate had something yet in store for them, of which neither had dreamed so far.

CHAPTER II.

THE OPEN HATCH.

THE golden glory of a morning early in May was lying upon the beautiful sheet of Southampton Water as Percy stepped eagerly out of his cabin. The great vessel was gliding smoothly along towards her berthing wharf ; but it would be still above an hour before she reached it. Passengers were still sleeping in their berths, or just stirring to get their final packings set on foot. But the deck was as yet deserted ; and Percy ran eagerly towards the spot where the donkey engine was at work—as it had been all night long—getting up from the deep cavernous hold the passengers' luggage stored below for the voyage.

Percy was keenly anxious about a certain

box of his own—a box in which reposed a certain treasure he was determined to bestow upon Maidie as a parting gift. The fourth officer had told him that if he would be out quite early the last morning, he would see that he had it all right, and could rummage out his gift in peace. And now the little boy was on his knees beside the precious box, which he had duly discovered, and was routing through its contents for the particular article he had settled upon as a keepsake.

For the moment the deck was quite silent and deserted. The men who had been getting up the luggage had gone to breakfast. Passengers were not yet about, and the mouth of the great hatch seemed to gape with open jaws; and even Percy's head swam a little as he looked down, down, down, into the cavernous depth which it revealed.

There were men walking about upon some of the shelves or galleries below, bringing

forward the last of the luggage, ready to be hauled up when the engine should start again ; but just at this moment unwonted stillness reigned on deck, and even the protecting rope, which almost always guarded the hatch when its cover had been removed, was lying slack along the planks.

Percy never quite remembered afterwards how it had happened. But he recollected hearing a warning shout from some man's voice. A little white fairy figure came skimming along towards him—and towards that gaping hole. Maidie herself could not tell him exactly what had possessed her ; but she had escaped from her nurse, who was packing up in the cabins ; she had run out in search of her playmate ; and, blinded by the level rays of morning sunlight straight in her eyes, had come skipping along right to the very edge of the open hatch without seeing it ; whilst the third officer, who had seen her peril and was in hot pursuit, was shouting alike to

warn her and Percy of the peril she was approaching.

It was Percy who had caught her—caught her on the very edge of that deep, dreadful, black chasm. He had sprung up from his knees just in time to race round and catch her ; but so close were they both to that dreadful abyss, tottering together upon the very verge of it, that the only possible way of escape from a tumble into its black depths was the one Percy instinctively took. With the child's weight in his arms, he threw himself backwards, and fell all his length upon the deck, striking his head with some violence against an iron capstan, and lying still and motionless as he fell, with red drops trickling from a wound in his head.

Maidie, white, shaken, and weeping, was carried back by the third officer to Lady Madeline's cabin, where she sobbed out all the story in her mother's arms ; and as soon as Lady Madeline fully understood what

had happened, she finished her toilet, and, leaving the trembling Maidie in charge of her nurse, went in search of someone who could give her news of Percy and his condition.

It was Mr. Hurst, the third officer, she came upon first. He was a pleasant, gentlemanly young man, and had been Percy's particular "chum" throughout the voyage, and he was looking concerned and anxious as he met the lady.

"No, it's nothing serious, exactly—the doctor says—but he's not got back his senses yet. No bones broken or anything like that; but there's a nasty cut on the back of his head, and most likely there will be a little concussion of the brain. Poor little chap! And with no home or friends over here. I suppose they'll take him in at his school and look after him. But it's rather a dismal look-out. I wish I'd a place of my own to take him to. He's a game little fellow."

“ I want to see the place where it happened,” said Lady Madeline, in her gentle way. “ You saw it all, did you not, Mr. Hurst ? Will you tell me exactly what happened ? ”

The rope was up again guarding the open hatch now, and the donkey engine was at work ; but he led the lady to the edge of the deep, dark, square hole, and she held to his arm as she looked shudderingly down, and pictured her little daughter’s rush across the deck towards Percy on the opposite side, and the fearful fall she must have had but for him. The officer felt the quiver which ran through her frame, and knew that she was conjuring up a vision of a little tumbled white heap, barely visible, lying down, down, down, in those black, yawning depths. It turned him a little sick, and he gently led the lady away.

“ It isn’t often my hatch is left unguarded, but passengers are not generally up so early. Don’t think about it any more. The boy

was there, and had all his wits about him. That comes of colonial training. Youngsters are 'up to snuff' from a very early age. He has his head screwed on the right way, that little chap. And all's well that ends well."

"But for him it has not ended well. He is hurt, and has no home to be taken to here. Who has the present responsibility over him?"

"He's in the captain's charge for the time being. He was going to keep him with him till he can leave the ship—that means till after she has reached the London Docks—and then take him to his school. That was the plan; but now——"

"Could I speak to the captain, do you think? Would he have time to spare me a few minutes?"

"I'm sure he would. Shall I tell him you want him?"

"Let me go to him, if he is busy——"

"Oh, that's all right. We've the pilot

on board now. I'll fetch him to you in the small saloon."

Lady Madeline was rapidly reviewing the situation. It seemed to her that there was only one thing to be done. The captain came quickly, and with him the ship's surgeon, for they had guessed it was about Percy Vere that the lady had wished to speak.

"What do you think of him?" she asked, looking from one to the other. "Is he seriously hurt?"

The captain signed to the doctor to speak, and he answered cheerily:

"Not serious in the ordinary acceptation of the term. He's a hard-headed little rascal, and will be none the worse in the long run. The difficulty is just the next week or so. He ought to be kept quiet and have no head work, and will want what we call 'mothering' for a spell. And that's where the difficulty comes in."

"You see, I haven't a home fit to take

him to myself," spoke the captain. "I lost my wife three years back, and I go either to my son or my daughter when I'm ashore, and I have a little crib of my own, too; but not a place where a child could get nursing and looking after. We were just thinking about some of those paying hospitals or nursing homes, if they did not care to have him at the school he is bound for——"

"I think I have a better alternative to offer," spoke Lady Madeline. "My husband's property lies very near to Dr. Dormer's school, where I hear you are to take him, Captain Clarke."

"That is so, my lady. Dr. Dormer's is the place. I hope it is a good school, where the lad will be happy."

"I believe so. It is well spoken of in the neighbourhood. Well, my proposal is this. Let me take the boy home with me; keep him until he is fit for school, and then transfer him to Dr. Dormer's care. He got this hurt in saving my heedless little daughter

from a terrible fall. I think the least I can do is to offer the hospitality of our house till he shall be fit for school."

"Capital—capital!" spoke the doctor, rubbing his hands together. "Nothing in the world could be better for the boy."

Captain Clarke's face expressed the liveliest satisfaction and relief.

"I could not wish anything better for the boy, if you are really willing to take charge of him in such a very handsome fashion. He is a fine little fellow, and I'd have done the best I could for him. There's money too—but it's not money that does the business in cases like this."

"Just so; it is the home care that is wanted. Well, if you will trust him to me, and let me have his parents' address, I will take him back with me, and write to them a full explanation, and I think we shall all be satisfied."

"Best thing possible—couldn't be better," spoke the doctor again.

“ You will not be afraid of his being moved when we get into port ? ”

“ He must be moved—there’s no helping it. Shipboard noise and a stuffy cabin would be worse for him. I’ll bind up his head and give him a sedative, and he’ll be quite quiet and passive all day. I should keep him in bed afterwards for a short spell. But you will have your own doctor then to advise you as to that. I’ll see him safe into the train for you, and after that you may be sure he will just sleep or drowse till you have him at home with you.”

Great was the excitement and delight of Maidie when she heard that Percy was to be taken to Beech Hurst with them.

“ Oh, Mother dear, I am so glad—so very, very glad ! He saved my life, didn’t he, Mumsey darling ? I shall tell Daddy so ! Mummy, I went and looked down that dreadful hole again ! I made Mr. Hurst take me. Wasn’t it deep and dark ? Oh, Mummy, suppose Percy hadn’t caught me

in time ? Or suppose we had both tumbled down into it ! ”

“ Darling, suppose, instead of thinking any such thing, we kneel down together and thank the dear Lord Jesus for saving my little Maidie from anything so dreadful ? That is the best thing for us to do when God has saved us from some great danger ; and then, after thanking Him, we can lay the burden down, and not be always dwelling upon it, though we will never forget our great gratitude to Him.”

So in that little cabin, with the sounds of bustle about them, mother and child knelt side by side for a few moments, giving thanks together for the merciful preservation of the little one in a moment of peril. Then the eager child, all excitement about their arrival, and about Percy and his condition, could no longer be controlled, and must needs rush off to seek news of him, and to watch the wharf where they were to berth for the tall, familiar figure of that “Daddy”

who, she was certain, would be waiting for them, early as the hour was ; though her mother had told her it was just a little uncertain whether he would be able to get away.

Percy had been carried away, out of the tumult and bustle, into the captain's own snug quarters, which once had been shown to Maidie by Percy on their peregrinations. She went there this time hand-in-hand with the doctor ; but Percy was lying with closed eyes, " asleep " as he called it ; and she just bent over him and kissed his cheek lightly, but did not try to wake him up.

" He'll get well all the faster if he sleeps nicely, won't he ? " she asked, with an upward glance at the doctor's face, half wistful, half smiling.

" Of course he will—get on like a house on fire. It's best he shouldn't rouse up just now and excite himself with all the bustle of getting off and saying good-bye. We'll just carry him to the train, and settle him

there, and let him have his sleep out. Won't he like it when he wakes up and finds himself at your home, little lady, instead of at school ? ”

Maidie clapped her hands gleefully. She had not thought of this charming “surprise.” She kissed her hands to the unconscious Percy as she quitted the little snug room she admired so much, and then she pulled the doctor with her to the lower level and the vessel's side.

“ I know my Daddy will be waiting for us—I'm just certain sure. Do help me to look for him. He's very tall and rather thin, and he generally wears nice brown clothes and gaiters. Oh, I do believe I see him there ! Yes, yes—I'm sure it's he ! Please do wave your big handkerchief—mine's so little. Or hold me up and let me wave ! Oh, thank you ; yes, he sees us now ! It is Daddy ! I knew he'd come. Daddy—Daddy ! Oh, isn't it nice to get home again ! ”

The tall man upon the wharf in the thick of the little crowd assembled there was one of the first to cross the gangway when once it had been run across the narrow dividing space. The little white fairy was placed in his arms as he stepped on board by the kindly ship's doctor, who then retired, touching his cap by way of farewell. And Maidie clung about her father's neck, pouring such broadsides of information into his ears that he was fairly bewildered by it all.

"Come along, Daddy. I know where Mother is. I'll take you, if you'll put me down. Mummy—Mummy! Here's Daddy! I told you he would be here. He's come to take us home. Oh, isn't it nice to see him again!"

Sir Reginald Grey held his wife long in his arms, looking down at her again and again between the kisses they hungrily exchanged. The soft colour in her face and the rounded contours of her delicate face and form convinced him that she had come

back with renewed health and vigour, and that the separation which had seemed long to both had not been in vain.

“Dearest, it is good to have you back. Yes, yes, my darling, I will take you home in good time. We will just let the rush of passengers for the boat train get off first. No, sweetheart, I have made special arrangements for ourselves. I thought you might be tired after the voyage, and perhaps not fully recovered from sea-sickness. We have a saloon carriage to take us straight home without any trouble of changing. It is all planned out for us, and we shall start in about an hour. I will see the luggage through the Customs and come back for you, or put you in the saloon carriage first, and then see to the luggage.”

“Oh, Daddy, how nice! That will be much the best for Percy. Mummy, I’ve been trying to explain; but I don’t think Daddy was listening—not properly. I don’t think he understands about Percy yet.”

“ I seem to have had ‘ Percy ’ dinned into my ears something considerable,” spoke Sir Reginald, with his hand upon his little daughter’s soft curls. “ Who is this wonderful Percy, Pussy-cat—a friend that you have made on board or in Madeira ? ”

“ He’s a boy, Daddy—a nice boy—generally. And he’s very brave. He saved my life, and he hurted himself, and Mother is going to take him home to make him well.”

Lady Madeline supplemented her little daughter’s brief statement of facts by a short explanation, whilst Maidie held her father’s hand and hopped from foot to foot in her eagerness and impatience.

“ Daddy, I think Percy ought to be took out of all this noise and bustle, and put into the saloon carriage, and then I can take care of him. The doctor is going to carry him, and if you take care of Mother, then I shall be free to take care of Percy. Don’t you think that would be a good plan ? I’ve

said good-bye to everybody now, and I want to be getting home."

They smiled at her eagerness, but they were anxious to get under weigh themselves, and Sir Reginald "knew the ropes" and had little difficulty in getting their luggage through the Customs, and his wife settled in the comfortable saloon carriage he had engaged for her. Then he suffered Maidie to lead him back to the boat, where the doctor was speedily found, who transported Percy carefully to the railway, Mr. Hurst himself seeing after his luggage, so that Maidie felt there was nothing lacking to the *éclat* of Percy's departure.

There was a comfortable sofa upon which Percy was laid, and as Maidie believed him still sleeping soundly she was not at all disturbed on his account. Sir Reginald talked a little with the surgeon about the condition of the boy, whilst Maidie was satisfied that all his belongings were safe, and rewarded Mr. Hurst at the last by a kiss of farewell.

“Percy will write to you when he’s well enough, because you’ve been like his friend all the time. We’ll take great care of him at Beech Hurst ; but perhaps it would be better for him not to go to school at all this term. I don’t think he ought to do lessons for a good while yet, with that cut on his head—do you ? ”

“Well, I daresay he won’t mind if he can’t,” spoke the young officer, laughing ; “he’s going to live in clover, anyhow, and will think his cracked crown cheap at the price ! ”

Then the young man saluted them all and went his way, and Maidie climbed upon her father’s knee, and settled down in his arms with a long sigh of satisfaction.

“It was a very nice ship, Daddy ; and they were all very nice—officers and men and everything. And the engines were lovely—so shiny and clean, though they made everybody else so dirty. Percy knows a lot

about engines, and he told me a lot, only I can't remember about it very well. But it's nice to get home. I thought I should be rather sorry when the voyage was over, but I'm not. You see, we are taking Percy home with us."

Sir Reginald looked across at the little boy lying with bandaged head in a dim corner of the carriage, with the blinds near to him carefully drawn down.

"So you are pleased to be taking Percy home, are you?"

"Oh, yes. I want to show him Beech Hurst, and the dogs, and the horses and the fowls, and everything. I think he thinks England is about as big as Madeira, and could almost get into his pocket. I want to surprise him!"

Sir Reginald laughed and pinched her ear.

"Well, if Percy comes from the Colonies, you may not find that very easy to accomplish, Pussy; but we'll see."

“ And you’ll let him stay till he’s quite well, Daddy ? You won’t send him to Dr. Dormer’s till he ought to go ? ”

“ I promise you that, little daughter, with all my heart. Percy has earned his footing at Beech Hurst, and shall have it.”

CHAPTER III.

BEECH HURST.

“HULLO!” exclaimed Percy, sitting suddenly up in bed. “Where in thunder have I got to now?”

A soft little laugh from somewhere close at hand sounded like an answer, and a little white fairy stood beside him in the shadowy dimness of the big room.

“Oh, Percy, did I wake you? Nurse said she thought you were waking up at last. You *have* been asleep such a time!”

Percy grabbed at his head with both hands. It felt silly and empty, and rather inclined to go round. He held it tightly with his palms, and was pleased to note that his hair had been cropped as close to his head as ever it would go. There were no curls to

twist and tangle when the comb was applied ; but one part of his scalp was covered by a bandage, and when he pressed it hard it hurt him somewhat.

“ Hold on, young ’un. I’m in a bit of a fog still. Say, am I sort of dreaming still ? ”

“ Are you, Percy ? I don’t know. I’m not. We’re at Beech Hurst, you know. Oh, p’raps you don’t know. You see, you got hurted just the last morning, and you’ve been sort of asleep ever since. Percy, do you remember the big ship, and the great hole—the thing they call a hatch—and how we nearly tumbled down into it together ? ”

Memory began to return to Percy in a rush.

“ Of course, I remember ! ” he cried. “ It was quite early, and there was nobody about, and I was grubbing in my box, and you came running. Mr. Hurst was shouting, and the hatch was open. That’s all I remember. What happened after ? ”

“ I didn’t see the hatch,” answered

Maidie ; “ the sun was all in my eyes. I wanted to get to you, but you rushed at me and caught hold of me, and we fell down together. I was all right, but you cut your head, and Mother brought you home with us to Beech Hurst, Percy. Isn’t it fun ? ”

“ Is this Beech Hurst ? Is this your home, young ’un ? Let me have a look at it. Why is it so dark ? ”

“ The doctor said you must lie in the dark for a few days. We got home on Saturday, you know ; and now it’s Tuesday. You’ve been asleep almost all the time. Don’t go to sleep any more just yet, Percy. I’ve such lots of things to show you ! ”

“ Fire away then, young ’un, and let’s have a little light on the subject. I’d like to see what sort of a place I’ve come to. And I say, Maidie, I’m just awfully hungry ! ”

“ Are you, Percy ? I’m so glad. I’ll run and get you something nice to eat. Cook makes me lovely things ; and I’ll draw one

of the curtains and blinds before I go, and you'll see if you like your room. It's one of the spare rooms where they put the visitors ; but you've got it now till you're better. Then you'll have one of the rooms in our wing—like the boys."

Maidie pulled back a heavy curtain that hung over one of the windows, and drawing up the blind let in a pleasant flood of light into the dim room. As it was a north room and looked out upon a shrubbery, the glare was not too strong for Percy's eyes or nerves. He blinked a little at first ; but gazed about him in edification and wonder. He had never seen a room for sleeping purposes half so fine or luxurious as this.

" Jiminy ! " he exclaimed, " but this is a ripping sort of place ! Are all the rooms like this one, young 'un ? "

" The grown-ups have rooms like this—we don't ; but I like ours better. We have such nice funny picture papers on the walls, and the nursery is all panelled, and we can draw

pictures in chalk all over it. Daddy gives us prizes if we make very good pictures. Oh, I'll show you everything when you're well. Now I'll go and get you something to eat! Oh, here's Nurse!—and I do believe she's brought you a meal!”

This was not the young nurse of the voyage, but a motherly-looking old dame in a big mob cap, and with a face rosy and seamed like a russet apple. She carried a tray in her hands; and a bowl of steaming soup gave forth an appetising odour. Percy rubbed his hands and wriggled with eagerness. He felt as though he had seen that kind old face in a dream, and when she spoke to him her voice seemed familiar.

“Seems as if I knew you, somehow,” he said. “I guess it's you who've been looking after me this last little while. It's awfully kind of you, I'm sure. I'm ever so much obliged.”

“Nursie's just a darling when anybody's ill,” cried Maidie, establishing herself upon



"SHE CARRIED A TRAY IN HER HANDS."

the bed, prepared to superintend Percy's meal. "Everybody gets well very soon when she takes care of them. Oh, and here's my darling Chico come to look for me. He can't bear me out of his sight a minute ; he thinks I shall be going to Madeira again. Lift him up, Nursie. I must show him to Percy. Isn't he a perfect darling ? "

Chico was a red dachshund—very long in the body, very short in the legs, with a satin, smooth coat, a splendid hound head, and ears of phenomenal length and silkiness.

"Sort of dog you buy by the yard, ain't he ? " asked Percy, as the long nose investigated his features one by one, the long, tapering tail waving approbation the while.

"He's the sweetest darling that ever lived ! " cried Maidie. "I can't think how ever I got on without him all these months ; but they thought he might be sea-sick on the voyage, or get ill in a strange climate, so we left him at home. I did miss him dreadfully ; and Daddy said he missed me as

badly. Oh, Chico, you are a perfect love ! ” And she hugged him in her arms, he nestling up to her and lying passive across her shoulder.

By the next day Percy was on his feet again. The doctor came early and sanctioned his getting up and wandering about the house a little, but advised no going out till the next day, as the sunshine might be a little too hot and strong. Percy was quite content with this amount of liberty. He felt a bit shaky just at first when he began his tour of inspection, with Maidie holding his hand and several dogs gambolling about them. There was a little fox-terrier called Pickle, as sharp as a needle and “ keen as mustard ” over any sort of sport, to whom Percy took an immense fancy ; and there was a stately deer-hound who looked quite in keeping with the stately house, as he paced beside them through the long corridors ; and a collie with a Landseer-like head, and pathetic, almost human, brown

eyes, who was Pickle's humble slave, and permitted himself to be outrageously bullied by that small specimen of canine turbulence.

“Colin saved Pickle's life when he was a tiny puppy,” explained Maidie; “some horrid boys were stoning him, and were going to drown him. Colin flew in amongst them and sent them flying—Tom the groom was out exercising the horses, and saw it all—and he seized up poor darling Pickle in his mouth and bounded home with him. He brought him straight to me, all cut and bleeding and half dead. I took him to Daddy, and Daddy had him taken care of for me till he was well. He's a very well-bred dog—not a bit of a mongrel. He's the prettiest fox-terrier I've ever seen. Wasn't it sweet of Colin? And now Pickle teases him so; but he's never angry. They are devoted to each other. Pickle sleeps in his kennel at night, and they always have dinner off the same plate. Colin waits till Pickle

has chosen what he likes best before he eats a mouthful."

In the big hall into which Maidie led her companion Sir Reginald was standing in riding dress, waiting for his horse to be led round. He looked up with a smile at the two children, and gave a special friendly nod to Percy.

"Finding your feet again, my boy? That is right. So, Maidie, you have got a boy at Beech Hurst in spite of its being term-time. I hope you are happy, Puss."

"I'm not going to let Percy go to school at all this term, Daddy," spoke the little maiden with an air of decision. "I'm sure he didn't ought to do any lessons for quite a long time, 'cept little easy ones that he can do with me. It's almost half term now, you know, Daddy; and if he misses that it won't be worth while going there at all. He'll have to stop here till after the summer holidays."

The father looked down with smiling eyes at the pair.

“And what does Percy say to that—eh?”

“Of course, Percy wants to do as I like him to,” answered Maidie, taking hold of his hand. “He thinks Beech Hurst is a ripping place. He keeps on saying so. Don’t you, Percy?”

“Rather!” answered the boy with emphasis; but then, looking up in his manly fashion into the baronet’s face, he added, “But, of course, sir, I’m not going to make a nuisance of myself here; it’s awfully good of you to take me in at all; but I’m off to old Dormer’s whenever you say the word. I know I’ve no right to be here really. It’s just your kindness.”

Sir Reginald laid his hand upon the close-cropped head.

“Well, Percy, I don’t know about that. I think you have a pretty clear claim to a place here for the present. We can let the future take care of itself, and see how

things turn out and how you get on. A letter to your parents goes by this week's mail, but it's a longish time before any answer can come."

"I shan't let him go till he's quite, quite, quite well, Daddy," asserted Maidie in her most autocratic tones. "Mother and I are quite decided about that. You can ask her. Oh, Daddy, that's a new horse you've got! What a beauty he is! What's his name? Oh, do lift me up on his back. Percy, can you ride? Do you love horses?"

Percy's eyes were glowing as they turned upon the fine mettlesome creature just led up to the big covered portico, where he stood pawing the gravel with impatient hoofs. He summed up his points in a fashion which brought a smile to Sir Reginald's face, and sent him up several pegs in Maidie's estimation.

"I suppose you've ridden pretty much ever since you could walk?" queried the

former, and Percy nodded assent. The two children watched him mount and ride off, and then Maidie cried :

“ I’ll show you the horses and our ponies another day. I’m glad you can ride, Percy. Daddy says I ride better than any of the boys. You see, they are so much at school now ; and when we were little—quite little, I mean—we didn’t live here, and we didn’t have ponies.”

“ Didn’t you always live here, then ? ”

“ Oh, no. Grandpapa lived here, and Daddy had something to do in London—it was called Foreign Office. We used to come and stay here at Christmas, and in the summer Nurse and I often stopped quite a time here ; but it was only after poor dear Grandpapa died that we came and lived here. It belonged to Daddy then. Only, you see, the boys were at school by that time, and they only have the holidays to do things in, and there are so many things to do they can’t get them all in. So they

don't ride so very well yet. I'm glad you do. We'll go out together when you're well enough. Roddy wants awfully to be a good horseman, like Daddy. Rex is keener about shooting, and Ronald about games. But Daddy wants them all to ride, too."

"Tell me about your brothers," said Percy, as they turned back into the cool house, and wandered through big, beautiful rooms, smelling of flowers, and down a long corridor to those nursery and schoolroom quarters which lay behind a red baize swing-door that Maidie pushed on one side to admit them to the oldest and quaintest wing of the fine old Manor House.

"Daddy calls them the Three R's. Rex is the eldest of us all; he's sixteen. He's at Eton. Ronald will go there soon; he'll be fourteen in the summer holidays. Roddy's twelve; he's going to be a sailor. Rex says he shall go into Parliament; but Daddy says it takes two to make that bargain. I

don't know what Ronald will do. I think he's the cleverest of them. Perhaps he'll write a book or make discoveries. What are you going to be when you grow up, Percy ? ”

“ Don't know yet. I haven't decided. On board I thought I'd be captain of a ship ; but Captain Clarke advised me not. At home I thought I'd stock-farm ; it's rather a jolly sort of life. I don't know what I'll be. Something one doesn't have to grind too hard at one's books over. I hate too much grind.”

Maidie shook her head with an air of wisdom.

“ Daddy says nothing is worth having unless it has cost us trouble to get. But anyhow, you won't have to grind yet, Percy. You'll have to give your head a rest ; I heard the doctor say so. Come and see my nurseries now, and the boys' rooms and the big workshop and playroom. All this wing of the house is our very own, and we may

do just what we like here. I can go pretty well everywhere I like all over ; but the boys have to keep to quarters pretty much when they are at home."

This big, ancient house, with its army of well-trained servants and the clockwork regularity of its times and seasons, was a curious revelation to the colonial boy ; but it was all very interesting and absorbing. The long, low-panelled rooms which formed the children's quarters on the ground floor, and opened into a big walled garden which was their special domain, where fruit trees and flowers jostled each other, and the lawn served for tennis, croquet, or golf as desired, and the shrubbery walks made fine places for hide-and-seek and other more adventurous games, formed a sort of wonderland for him. If he missed the wide spaces and boundless liberty of his old life, he found fresh and vivid interests in this new one. And as he had no great disposition to run helter-skelter all over the place as a week ago he would

have done, but liked to sit about in shady places, or in the quaint old-fashioned rooms, and let Maidie tell him tales or read to him out of her endless array of story-books, he won golden opinions from Nurse, who thought him one of the best-behaved boys she had ever seen. Percy sometimes felt he was sailing under not quite true colours ; for he knew very well that he had plenty of capacity both for mischief and for idleness—which was one reason why he had been sent half across the world for his education—but just now it was easy to be quiet and docile and good.

“I should be a young beast if I were anything else,” he told himself more than once. Yet all the while he had a dim perception that he would not be quite such an exemplary character if everything were not so strange to him here, and if he felt quite up to his usual standard of health and strength.

It was a great delight to Maidie when she

got leave for Percy to drive her out in her little governess pony-cart—just the two alone together. Generally she had to go under the escort either of a governess or a groom ; but the governess had left before Maidie went to Madeira for the winter, and no other had yet been engaged in her stead. And to have Percy for her charioteer was splendid. Sir Reginald took Percy out with him once, and after that he said the children would be perfectly safe together.

“ I’ll take you into Writlington, and we’ll buy sweets ; and we’ll come back by Dr. Dormer’s, so that you can see what the house is like,” cried Maidie. And Percy, holding whip and reins in workmanlike fashion, sent the fat little pony along at a rattling good speed, the dogs racing delightedly after them, and inciting Mops to do his utmost to keep them going.

“ You do drive so nicely ! You shall teach me, Percy. You don’t jerk the reins like George ; and you don’t have to lash

Mops as Miss Tollard used to do to make him go. He likes going with you ; you make such nice noises to him. Daddy says you handle a horse first-rate. Daddy likes you, Percy ; I'm sure of it. I hope you'll stay with us ever such a long time."

It was a fine, breezy morning without too much sun. Percy still felt the sun on his head an unwelcome reminder of something wrong ; and he could not read any time together without his eyes swimming and his head aching. But so long as he was walking or playing, or driving about with Maidie, he felt better and stronger every day, and sometimes wondered whether, as the half-term period approached, it would be decided that he could go to school without too much risk.

He knew he wanted to stay on at Beech Hurst ; but he was equally resolved not to say a word about this, or to make a fuss about his head, which might be a sort of hint that he felt himself unfit for lessons. He

was a manly little fellow, and was not going to "play old soldier," as he called it, not for anything. He pretty well understood that, if he could not get in this half term, he would be kept at Beech Hurst till September, and this was a pretty "large order" in his vocabulary.

Although the colonial ideas of hospitality are liberal, a four months' visit straight off was a pretty stiff dose, though Maidie began to talk as though Beech Hurst was his lawful and rightful home.

It was interesting to drive through the cheerful little town, to see how everybody capped to Maidie, and to watch her little airs of patronage at the different shops, as she made her purchases and exchanged friendly words with the people. The visit to the sweet shop was very interesting, and Maidie's orders were large and generous.

"I don't have sugar in my tea," she explained, "and I don't eat many sweet puddings or rich things. Mother does not

like it. But she says that a few good sweets are wholesome for children, and this man sells very good ones. We always go to him, and he makes some of them specially for me."

They drove out past a big church, and then out upon a wide, flat road, beyond which there was a bit of woodland and some big fields, and Maidie pointed to these and said :

"The boys play there, but beyond the wood is out of bounds. That's the place, Percy—all those big buildings with the trees round them. That's Dr. Dormer's school, where Roddy wanted to go."

Percy looked curiously at the place, wondering how he would like the life there, and whether he would be very lonely.

"I wish Roddy were there," he remarked, "then I shouldn't mind half so much. I think I shall like that brother Roddy of yours."

"I expect you will. He's my favourite ;

though I'm not sure that he's the best of them. Daddy calls him a pickle ! ”

Percy grinned a little.

“ My father sometimes calls me that—or words to that effect,” he remarked, “ so perhaps there will be a pair of us one of these days.”

CHAPTER IV.

HALF TERM.

“PERCY, Percy—it’s all settled! Everything’s just as we wanted! You’re not to go to school yet; Dr. Melton says so. It would make your head bad to do lessons, so Mummy says it would be ’dicolous for you to go to school; and you’re just going to stop on here till next term—right through the summer holidays! Oh, what fun!”

Maidie cut a delighted caper, and Percy’s eyes glowed. He was sitting curled up in the nursery window-seat, and his face was a little pale and worried-looking. For three days he had been reading regularly out of some lesson-books and doing sums, and to-day the doctor had come to see the result. He had made Percy read to him, and he

had asked him questions, and Percy had got very muddled and confused, and after a little while, to his great shame and confusion, he had burst into tears and had cried like a baby. Then the doctor had patted his head—which felt hot inside and ached badly—had told him to cheer up, and that everything would soon come right. Then he had gone away, leaving Percy alone, much humiliated, and furious with himself alike for his stupidity and his tears. He had been very glad that Maidie was not present to witness his discomfiture, and was wondering why on earth he had been such an ass as to cry—he who had scarcely shed a tear since his babyhood—when Maidie came racing in with this wonderful piece of news, which lifted quite a big burden from his heart.

“Isn’t it nice, Percy? Isn’t it nice? And I’m not to have a new governess just yet, Mummy says. You and I are to live in the woods, and ride about and have lovely gipsy times till the boys come back.

Mother is going to give us little lessons herself out in the woods ; and perhaps, by and by, you'll go to Mr. Street—he's a clergyman, you know—and read a little Latin with him. I'd like to learn Latin, too. You shall teach me what you know."

" 'Tisn't much," said Percy ; " I was never good at books, and I seem to have forgotten everything now."

" Oh, but you'll remember again, and you mustn't worry over trying too hard ; Dr. Melton said so. And, Percy, listen ; Roddy's coming home for three days next week—it's the *exeat*, you know, and they've got an extra day because some old boy has done something, you know. Rex and Ronald are to go to London—Daddy will meet them there and take them to some cricket matches ; but Roddy is coming home here. I'm so glad ! We'll have such fun ! "

It was wonderful how soon Percy's head seemed to stop worrying him, with all this exciting and pleasant news. He had been

trying hard to make up his mind to school life, and had not told anybody, even the doctor, how difficult it was to fix his thoughts upon books, or to read without the letters dancing up and down before his eyes. He felt it would be mean and cowardly to shirk school and make a fuss about his head ; but now that other people had settled the matter for him, he was overflowing with joy. Four whole months of the joys of Beech Hurst now lay before him ! It was splendid !

Meeting Sir Reginald in the grounds a few hours later, he said, in a fashion half manly, half shame-faced :

“ It’s most awfully good of you to let me stay, sir. I do hope I shan’t be a nuisance. I can’t think what makes everybody here so kind to me ; I’m awfully obliged—really I am.”

“ Well, my boy,” said the baronet kindly, “ I do not think the load of obligation lies upon your shoulders. You see what our one little daughter is to us—our little white ewe

lamb. When we think what might have happened to her but for your promptitude and courage——”

Percy crimsoned all over. He had scarcely realised before how this incident had struck the grown-up world of Beech Hurst. He felt confused, and ran off to hide this. But it made his heart glad to think that they regarded him not as an interloper cast upon their care, but as the champion of their little daughter, who was so very dear to them.

“We’ll go and meet Roddy!” cried Maidie on the day that the youngest of the Three R’s was expected home. “We’ll drive ourselves in the little cart, and George can get up the luggage. It will be such fun to have Roddy again! I wonder if you’ll like him, Percy?”

“Oh, I guess I shall. I get on with most chaps. It’s only the muffs I can’t cotton to; but I don’t guess Roddy’s that.”

“No, I’m sure he is not. Come on; it’s

almost time to start. When Roddy comes we'll begin to ride. Dr. Melton said he thought you could soon do that. It isn't that sort of thing that makes you giddy, is it, Percy ? ”

“ Not a bit—it's only books and thinking. But I never told Dr. Melton I was giddy—did you ? ”

“ No ; but I think he knew. Perhaps Mummy told him ; Mummy always knows everything. Oh, won't we have fun ! Come on ! ”

They raced to the stables and watched the pony put in. The dogs caught the excitement and made a fine to-do, barking and leaping about them.

“ Darling Chico, you shall come in the cart, and run home on your own legs. It's too far for you to run all the way, and I do love having you by me ! Doesn't he look sweet sitting up on the seat ? He behaves so beautifully always, now that he isn't sick, as he used to be when he was a puppy !

I suppose it was like being sea-sick to him. I was never sea-sick on the boat, nor on the yacht either. People get such a queer green colour when they are. But Chico never got green. I wonder if he looked green under his brown fur. Do you think he did ? ”

“ Don’t know, I’m sure. Perhaps he did. You know hens faint sometimes when they’re being washed for a show. Their red combs get quite white, and you have to give them brandy ! ” And the children laughed merrily at the notion, as the pony set off at a rapid bundling trot which was half a canter, his head down and his forefeet striking out playfully at the dogs as they gambolled about him.

“ He does go so well with you, Percy ; yet you scarcely ever use the whip. I do like to see you with animals ; you are so clever ! ”

Maidie went into the station to meet her brother, Percy remaining with the pony-cart outside. The train soon came snorting in,

and after a brief interval the dogs came tearing out in a great state of jubilation, heralding the two children, who advanced, only a little more sedately.

Percy looked curiously at the little boy, who was about his own age. He was not so tall as the young colonial, but was more stoutly built, with a square head and a composed manner. He looked "up to snuff," as boys call it, and the pair eyed each other with frank curiosity and goodwill.

"Chico, darling, you must run now—it'll do you good. We won't go too fast for your little legs. Roddy, this is Percy. You know all about him from Mummy's letters. I tell her what to say. Oh, Roddy, what an age since I saw you—it's like a year! You've grown so big!"

"That comes of gadding all over the world, ma'am, instead of stopping at home as a good little girl should. It was an awful chouse not having you or Mother home at Christmas; it didn't seem a bit right,

somehow. How do, Percy? Going to drive, eh?"

"No—you, if you like," answered Percy; but Roddy's hands remained in his pockets.

"No; we'll see you do the trick. Maidie thinks an awful lot of your driving. Gee-up, Mops, and stir your stumps! I want to be home in double-quick time."

The mother was waiting for them as they drove through the second gate at Beech Hurst, and Roddy flung himself out of the cart to meet her with a bear-like hug. But by the time Percy had driven into the stable-yard the new-comer was at his side again, and Maidie with the dogs came dancing after.

Roddy was keen upon the horses, that was very evident. He visited every stall and box, and then he rushed out to the paddock where the children's ponies were kept, and whistled to the tame little creatures there to come and take carrots and sugar from his hands.

These ponies were all pretty and docile. Percy secretly thought them rather too tame for sport. They had been carefully selected so as to be safe for young and rather inexperienced riders. They were well-bred and good-looking, but did not exactly appeal to the colonial boy.

“ You’d ride any of ’em bare-backed, I daresay,” remarked Roddy.

And Percy laughed a little as he answered, “ Rather ! ”

“ Oh, Percy—do show up ! ” cried Maidie, capering with delight. “ Take the big one—Rex’s Hector. Let’s see you jump up and ride him just as he is ! Would it be safe ? ”

Percy laughed. Next moment he was over the rails, and with a run and a vault had landed upon the back of the largest of the ponies. Then, grasping the mane in one hand, and digging his heels into the creature’s flanks, he set him off at a gallop round and round the enclosure, the other

ponies, suddenly excited and half alarmed, flinging up their heels and joining in the chase.

For a moment Maidie was half frightened ; but next minute she saw how perfectly safe and at ease Percy was. He gave a whoop and a shout, set his steed at a ditch which crossed the paddock, and with a clever twist of the hand in his mane, sent him flying across with a bound worthy of a deer.

“ Bravo ! ” shouted Roddy. “ That’s about the style. I say, Maidie, that’s not half a bad sort of chap. Wasn’t sure straight off that he mightn’t be a bit of a bore ; but I think we’ll have larks together—he and me.”

Next morning, at a somewhat unearthly hour, Percy was awakened from his slumbers by Roddy, who had invaded his room half dressed, and now proceeded to awake him and make a proposition.

“ I say, you awake ? Get up, then, and let’s go out. I want you to teach me that

trick of yours with the ponies. I'm sick of what's called learning to ride—trotting on a leading rein with some bloke of a groom. I want to do things as you do them in your country. Come along out, before the men are about. You show me ; I'll soon learn the trick."

Percy was up and dressed in a twinkling. He had all a boy's love of anything novel, and a certain satisfaction in showing off his prowess and skill, though he could not see that either were very much needed with these tame, trained ponies.

The two boys crept quietly out of the sleeping house, and made a rush for the paddock ; and there were the ponies quietly grazing, whilst the doors of their comfortable sheds, with the straw for their bedding, stood open, as at this season of the year they always did. There were a couple of big dogs chained near to the paddock to guard its approaches ; but these wagged ecstatic tails at the approach of the boys, and were

rewarded by an early release from their chain.

“Which one do you want?” asked Percy, as the ponies threw up their heads and came trotting up with lifted heads and tails.

“That piebald’s mine; but he’s a bit of a slug. They all are—don’t you think?”

“Not slugs exactly, but what I’d call circus ponies—do anything you expect of them. But they’ll be the very things for you to practise rough-riding on. Never been on without saddle or bridle before?”

“No, never. Is it difficult to learn?”

“Can’t scarcely remember learning. One is always scrambling about in the paddocks when one’s a kid, and clambering on the horses. Dad always said he thought I’d be killed, but I never was. Here—tumble up now; I’ll help you. No, no—not that way. See—you’ve got to get his mane in your hand, and give a bit of a run and a jump—so; and there you are!”

Percy was there, certainly—on the back of Hector again ; but Roddy, though he made a mighty effort, only succeeded in frightening the piebald, who put down his head, flourished his heels, and set off for the far end of the paddock. But Percy set Hector after him, rounded him back, and brought him up, and then began giving Roddy a lesson in earnest.

The schoolboy did not lack for pluck, but he was somewhat heavily built, and had not the knack of rapid sympathetic movement, or the intuitive knowledge when to make his vault. However, he showed a dogged determination not to be beaten, and Percy assisted and encouraged. First he tried riding quietly in this bare-backed fashion, and this was not difficult after a bit ; but when the piebald gave a plunge, or set off at a canter, Roddy found his seat precarious, and more than once parted company with his steed, and remained sitting somewhat breathlessly on the ground, whilst



"REMAINED SITTING SOMEWHAT BREATHLESSLY ON
THE GROUND."

Percy went off into fits of boyish, good-humoured laughter.

Nevertheless, in spite of failures, by the end of an hour Roddy felt he had made progress, and as he sauntered back to the house with Percy he confided to him his secret ambition.

“Dad has a big herd of Exmoors over at one of the farms out there. These were chosen out of the herd for us. But some of them are much bigger and much prettier. I awfully want to catch and ride some of them. You’d like it awfully yourself, Percy. You teach me, and one of these days we’ll go and have a squint at the unbroken ones. That’s the kind of sport for you, isn’t it? Have you ever been on an unbroken horse yourself?”

“Oh, rather! Lots of them are hardly broken in at all; but the men use them when they’re wanted. One can mostly make them do what you want. It’s the buck-jumpers who are the trouble; but I don’t

think you get that sort much over here. I'd like to see these ponies of yours. I didn't know you had any."

"Yes, we have. It's a family fancy, instead of keeping deer as some people do. Grandfather had them first; and every now and then there's a big sale, and lots of them are bought up; but there are always heaps left. Now and then in winter they come into the park; but mostly they live over yonder, near one of the farms. I'd like to do some stock-riding there!"

Percy's eyes brightened. That would be like a taste of home, he thought. He and Roddy drew sensibly nearer together.

"You'd better not talk about the ponies, though," Roddy observed, as they neared the house. "Dad's rather nervous about them—I mean about us going near them. They're a bit shy and wild, and Mother is always afraid we might get hurt."

Percy grinned sympathetically. He had already discovered that children in England

were more carefully guarded than he had ever seen them where he came from. This care had been grateful to him so far, when he had felt himself shaky and queer; but he could fancy it might become a bit of a bore later, and it was no trouble to him to hold his tongue.

Sir Reginald met the boys as they came towards the house, and was quite satisfied when he heard that Percy had been giving Roddy a riding lesson in the paddock. There was nothing in that to excite any uneasiness, and he encouraged Roddy to make the most of his opportunities whilst he had a "colonial rough rider" to instruct him.

Maidie was quite excited about it; and next morning she was up also with the lark, and accompanied the boys to the paddock. Roddy got on better this second time, and the ponies were more accustomed to the experiments, and were easier to manage.

The little girl sat upon the fence, and clapped her hands in admiration of the prowess of Percy, and of Roddy's efforts to emulate him. She wished she was a boy herself, to do the same things ; but when they went out riding together, later in the day, it gratified her to hear Percy praise her seat and her method of handling her pony. She looked a very dainty little maiden in her white coat and cap and pretty grey riding skirt. She had a charming little cream-coloured pony, with long floating mane and tail ; and though he was docile and gentle, he had both spirit and pace in him, and Maidie's skill in managing him excited Percy's approbation.

“ That's the style—you've got the hang of the thing by nature,” he said, “ and we'll soon knock Roddy into shape. He's plenty of pluck—and that's half the battle. I say, how jolly it would be if we could go out camping some time in the summer ! ”

“ What's that ? ” cried Maidie, her eyes

alight with the excitement and pleasure of a new idea.

“ Oh, don't you know ? You take a tent and a few pots and pans and things ; and you've a pack-horse to carry them and you ride your own horses, and you go into the bush, or after strayed cattle, or prospecting, or whatever it is ; and you just camp out and shoot game, and have your own billy and your own damper, and keep along the trail where there's water, and strike your camp just as you like. It's awfully jolly—unless you miss the water-holes.”

“ Oh, Percy, but could we camp here ? There isn't any bush, and we don't have water-holes.”

“ You don't need them in this blessed old country ; you've got water everywhere—all over the shop. So much the better for you ! Camp—of course we could ! Look over yonder at that big heath ; and there are miles and miles of meadows, and moors, and things. Of course it ain't the real

thing, but it would be jolly fun to have our tent and our camp, and cook our food for ourselves, and tether the horses, and be pioneers."

"Oh, jolly!" cried Roddy, enthusiastically. "I believe Dad would let us. He likes us to learn to do things ourselves, and everybody knows us round here. Even the Mater couldn't get the funks on. But you must wait till we've got home for the long holidays, Percy."

"Of course. But we'll be thinking about it, and making our plans, won't we, Maidie? We can ride about and prospect, and see where a good camping place would be—to start with. But of course we must shift and go on; that's half the fun of it. Oh, we'll get it all planned out whilst you're at school, and when you come home again we'll make a start."

"That's the style!" cried Roddy, switching the piebald into a good gallop; and before he left upon the next day he secretly

confided to Percy that perhaps they might combine the two prospective plans, camping out and playing stock-farming with the herd of unbroken Exmoor ponies.

“That would be first-rate!” assented Percy. “We could have a try at cattle-lifting then—and see what happened!”

CHAPTER V.

SUMMER TIME.

THE weeks seemed just to fly. Long as the days were, they did not seem half long enough for all the things that Percy and Maidie wanted to do. Percy was full of invention. He had a thousand charming suggestions to make, which were entrancing to Maidie. Her own games he rather despised, and occasionally they quarrelled for a short time ; but the periods of coolness did not last long. Percy would generally begin to laugh, and though Maidie was not altogether pleased at being made game of, she generally ended by laughing too, and so the peace was made. And certainly, if Percy did think her games babyish, he had very delightful ones to offer as substitutes ; and it was really

more interesting to have their own hut in the woods, and hold it against wild bush-rangers, and cook their own food and wash up their plates and dishes, than to be always playing at being a queen or a princess, receiving embassies and making knights and champions.

Nurse sometimes shook her head over the condition in which Maidie's white frocks came back after a morning in the woods. But Lady Madeline smiled, and suggested that some holland overalls should be made to protect them, and, thus equipped, Maidie felt quite like a "squatter," as she explained to her father, though what a squatter was she never could quite imagine, in spite of Percy's many stories about them.

"I suppose they have no chairs or tables, and just have to squat," she remarked once, whereupon Percy went off into fits of laughter, and Maidie joined, wondering if she had made a joke.

"It's all practice against we go camping

out when the boys come home," Percy sometimes said; "we'll have first-rate times then; and I want to get my hand in for cooking. I don't expect those fellows will know much about it."

"Rex can cook sausages, I know—he had to when he was a fag—and make toast too. I can make cakes in the kitchen, but I don't know if I could out here."

"I tell you what: we ought to have a sort of a tent if we go camping here. One never knows in this old country whether it's going to rain or not. Have you got such a thing about the place?"

"I think there is one somewhere. We had it for a garden party—not the big ones where people eat, but a tiny little striped one where a few people played music. I think I know where it'll be stowed away. Let's come and see!"

Over the big fruit room, which was always kept locked, was a huge store place, where all manner of things were kept. Percy had

promised in the first instance to make a tent, as he had suggested doing all kinds of things which somehow never had got done. With returning health and vigour, a little of the swagger of the colonial boy had crept into his words and bearing. It was evident that he felt himself rather a fine fellow, and expected others to regard him in the same light as Maidie certainly did.

He was ingenious and inventive enough ; but somehow things did not get put through when once they were started. He had begun to make Maidie a model of an Australian sheep and cattle farm, and they had collected a lot of material in a corner of the walled garden, and had indicated the position of the homestead, and laid out some of the paddocks with their wire fences and slip rails ; but then something else had occurred to him, and he had left the wood and wire piled in a corner, and they had begun upon the grotto, which Maidie had always

wanted to have just where the tiny stream that ran through the grounds leaped down a little precipice into a pool below, where ferns and moss clothed its banks, and where stones lay about in a tempting profusion.

More than once her brothers had started upon this projected grotto; but holidays were short-lived, and there was much to be done, and the grotto was left unfinished. Now Percy had declared he would have it finished in a trice, and he planned it on a larger and grander scale, which involved the pulling down of a good deal that had been done. But somehow after the first energetic start there came a "slump," as he called it. It was hot, and he voted it a "grind." They were beginning to cut the hay, and that drew the children's thoughts in a new direction. To mount upon the little queer seat of the mowing machine, and manipulate the movements of the pair of strong sleek horses was the very joy of Percy's heart. Soon he

showed such an aptitude for the task that the men were not afraid to trust him. But Maidie found it a trifle dull when her companion became so entirely engrossed in the hayfields. And so she was very glad when he presently tired of the monotony of the mowing machine, and after spending a day or two with her tossing and amusing themselves amongst the drying grass, they were back in the gardens again, on the look-out for some fresh form of amusement.

So that the idea of the tent was welcome to both. Also this great storehouse was new to Percy, and very interesting. All sorts of odds and ends had accumulated there. He seized first upon one thing, and then upon another—an old hatchet, a bill-hook, some lengths of cord and rope, and these with various other things he set aside in one corner.

“We shall want a lot of things like that out camping,” he remarked. “Now how about

the tent, young 'un ? What's it like to look at when it's at home ? ”

“ There it is,” cried Maidie, who had been rummaging round on her own account, “ that striped red and white bundle. I'm sure that's it. Can you get it out, Percy ? I'll help you. Do you know how to put it up ? Oh, what fun ! ”

They pulled it out between them, and then Maidie summoned Jem, the garden boy, and their humble slave and ally, to come and help them to get it up. Percy declared they would set it up first in the orchard just below, where nobody ever came to trouble them at their games. Percy seemed to know all about it when they got the pieces collected—pointed iron stays to drive into the ground, and ropes to hold it steady, and so on.

Maidie danced round them in an ecstasy of delight, as the little tent was slowly set up in the shade of a big gnarled apple tree.

“ Oh, Percy, what a little darling, ducky tent ! Will that be where we shall live when we camp out ? Will it be big enough for us all to sleep in ? Oh, won't it be just delicious ! ”

“ D'ye think they'll let you come camping ? ” asked Percy doubtfully. Maidie's face fell ; it had never occurred to her that she would be left out.

“ Oh, Percy ! You wouldn't leave me behind ? ” And the tragic look in her eyes was quite pathetic.

“ Oh, I don't want to—it won't be my doing ; only I didn't know what your mother would say about it. Camping's more for men, you know. But don't cry, I say ; you can generally get your own way, you know. I've noticed that precious often.”

Maidie's tears began to dry, but she still looked anxious.

“ I never thought of your going without me. Would you *care* to go if I couldn't come, Percy ? ”

“ I—well, you see, girls and women have to stop at home sometimes ; but we’ll see. They may do things different over here ; and of course it’s not real camping—only make-believe. That’s the rotten part of it ; but I guess those brothers of yours won’t care—they’ll not know the difference, perhaps.”

Maidie noticed now and again a little touch of contempt in the way in which Percy spoke of English boys, as though they were rather on the level of girls. It had stirred her to wrath occasionally ; but she consoled herself by thinking that when the “ Three R’s ” got home for the summer holidays, they would teach Master Percy a lesson.

So she did not take up the cudgels now, but threw herself heart and soul into a rehearsal of the camping out which was now occupying them so much. They collected wood and made a fire near their tent, Percy swung a kettle over it, and he got

some dough and cooked it in the ashes. Maidie found it hard work to get her teeth through, but pronounced it "delicious"; and they raided the meadows where the cows were at grass, and Percy after two or three abortive attempts, succeeded in finding one gentle, motherly cow who submitted to be milked by him. They got strawberries from the garden, and feasted royally, and Maidie was only eager to be allowed to sleep in the tent to see what it felt like; but Percy advised her not to propose this yet.

"They'd think you'd get cold, or something; and it ain't so mighty comfortable sleeping rolled in a blanket on the ground. Men don't mind — fellows out yonder — they're used to it; but I don't think you'd care about it so much. Anyhow, we'd better wait a bit first, and see how they take to the idea of our camp."

Maidie brought her father and mother out to look at their little encampment next

day. They had found several more odds and ends in the lumber-room above the nurseries, and had given the tent a certain air of comfort. Percy had built up a fire-place where they could do a little cooking, and where a kettle was boiling on a brisk little wood fire ; and some smoky tea was offered to Lady Madeline, together with some of Percy's "damper," of which she heroically partook, thankful that the dogs were eager to assist her in getting through this last-named delicacy.

Maidie looked so delighted and so brimming over with health and spirits that the parents smiled kindly at the little camp, and praised several of the ingenious contrivances arranged by Percy.

"When the boys come home we want to go camping properly, Daddy," cried Maidie, hanging upon his hand and looking up coaxingly into his face. "Percy knows all about camping—and it would be such fun !"

“ Ah, well, we’ll see,” answered the father, smiling indulgently. He knew that many plans were evolved for the holidays of which only a small fraction were carried through. Maidie saw the smile and capered anew.

“ And if they go, Daddy, I’m going too ! It is a shame I’m not a boy ; but I can do the things they do. Ask Percy ! ”

“ Well, Pussy-cat, we’ll see what it all comes to. I don’t know that Mother and I want very badly to change our little daughter into a small son ; but she shall have as good a time, I think I can promise, take it all round, as though she were a boy ! ”

Percy laughed. He did not himself think that anything made up for being a girl instead of boy ; but he understood very well that Maidie was a lucky little creature, whose life was likely to be a very sunny one.

Three days later the schoolboys came

home. Percy was curious to see the elder pair, and looked at them with frank and eager interest as they drove up and leaped out of the wagonette sent to fetch them. For a moment he had leisure to observe them critically, as they were absorbed by the tumultuous welcome of Maidie and the dogs, to say nothing of their greetings to the parents. Maidie had insisted on collecting all the dogs upon the premises—indoors and out—to welcome home the boys, so that the barking and yelping and tumult were almost deafening, and the whole place seemed full of leaping, bounding, and frantically happy creatures.

Rex was a tall, handsome boy of sixteen, with that polish of manner, partly inherited from his parents, partly the outcome of his training, which is often to be noted in English schoolboys when they have outgrown the "cub" stage of existence. He looked almost like a man, Percy thought, in his well-brushed clothes and with his pleasant, easy



"MAIDIE INSISTED ON COLLECTING ALL THE DOGS TO
WELCOME HOME THE BOYS."

manners. In the face he was very much like his mother, though not at all effeminate. Indeed, he was a rather particularly manly-looking boy.

Ronald was younger-looking altogether, being still in the knickerbockers and Norfolk jacket of preparatory school, where more freedom in costume is allowed. He was a good bit taller than Roddy, who wore a similar dress, more slender and graceful, with laughing brown eyes, something like Maidie's, and altogether quicker in his ways, more alert and active, though not so sturdy in build.

It was he who came up to Percy, even before Roddy did, and gripping him by the hand said in friendly fashion :

“ Glad you're here still ; Maidie's letters, when Mother writes for her, are cram full of you. Hope you're having a good time, and that we're all going to have one now.”

“ You bet ! ” answered Percy with a

grin, and felt at home with Ronald at once.

“ Play cricket ? ” asked the schoolboy.

“ A bit, but not much. Dad used to teach us over yonder ; but there was always lots of work going, and since I left home I’ve not touched a bat.”

“ Percy’s the dab at riding, as I’ve told you,” said Roddy, who had now come up, with a train of yelping dogs at his heels. “ Come along, Percy ; Mother wants these curs taken back to the stables. We’ll go and have a look at the gees. You come along, too, Ron ; we’ve heaps and hosts of things to look at.”

The three boys raced away. Maidie looked after them, half hesitating, and just a trifle offended that they had left her behind. But Rex held her hand still. Rex seemed almost to have grown into a man since she had seen him last. He wasn’t all in a fever to begin tearing over the place. He went with his parents into the drawing-room, and

told them about what he had been doing at school, and about his friends there, holding Maidie between his knees the while, and pinching her cheek from time to time.

“So you have been quite the little traveller since I saw you last, and have brought home a wild kangaroo from Australia to tame! How do you like him now you’ve got him, Maidie? He looks a smart little chap. Is he quite bursting with cheek?”

Maidie laughed. It was nice to have her own boys back again, even though she and Percy were such friends. She wanted them all to be friends; but she thought perhaps it would not be altogether amiss for Percy to have boys to deal with instead of only one little girl. Perhaps he was a little too pleased with himself about some things.

“Let’s go and see what they are doing,” she said by-and-by, and Rex rose at once, and out they went, the faithful Chico, who

alone of all the dogs had remained with Maidie, dancing and capering on in front of them.

“ Pickle always goes with Percy now, and Colin goes with Pickle everywhere ; but Chico loves me more than all the rest. Isn’t he a darling, Rex ? ”

“ Poor little beggar, he was awfully unhappy when you were away. He couldn’t make it out why you didn’t come back for Christmas. Little visits he could understand ; but to be all that time away ! He used to come about with me, and he always slept on my bed. I was awfully sorry to leave him behind, but he had just begun to cheer up a little, and by Easter he was more himself ; he seemed to understand that you were soon coming back then. Hullo ! Who’s that ? Oh, well ridden, sir ! But, I say, does the governor like the carriage horses used in that fashion ? ”

For as they emerged into the garden, upon the terrace overlooking the park, they

saw the two big horses, lately in the wagonette, now out in the open glade below them, a rider on the back of each, and whilst one had taken his steed cleverly over a big ditch, the other had striven to emulate the feat, and was now lying on his back upon the grass, kicking up his heels and roaring with laughter—not hurt one bit, as was plain, and ready for another attempt.

“ That’s Ronnie ! ” cried Maidie excitedly. “ Ronnie on the ground, and Percy careering about. Oh, look at Roddy ! He’s trying to get up. He never will—he’s not big enough. See, Ronnie’s going to help him. There he goes. Oh, bravo, Roddy ! Percy taught him a lot of things at the *exeat*, but it was only three days, you know. Percy can ride, can’t he, Rex ? Oh, here comes Daddy. I wonder if he will mind ? ”

Sir Reginald came to the ha-ha and stood looking on. He was used to madcap pranks in holiday time, and he smiled at Maidie’s excited exclamations and explanations. But

when the stablemen came running to fetch the horses, which had been purloined from the stable yard whilst the men were at their tea, he bade the boys give them up to their rightful caretakers.

“ You’ve got your own ponies, lads, for your own amusement. You had better leave the carriage horses alone for the present, till you have a little more experience. We don’t want one of a matched pair blemished by any of your skylarking. You stick to your ponies.”

“ Come and see the camp ! ” cried Maidie, taking Roddy’s hand and darting away towards the orchard. They all followed her, Ronald and the dogs outracing them easily, and the two Reginalds—father and son—bringing up the rear more soberly.

“ We’re going to camp out ! ” cried Maidie, full of excitement. “ There’s the tent, and we’ve got lots of other things too. Percy can make bread—lovely bread—it’s so hard

you can't eat much, so it's very economical, and the dogs have the rest ; and we milk cows and make tea, and there's room in the tent to sleep. Oh, Daddy, don't laugh like that ! We really want to camp, and you can't unless you sleep out too ; Percy says so. I don't want Nurse. I can dress myself, if somebody hooks me up, and my big overalls are lovely. I do so want to sleep in our dear teeny-weeny tent. Oh, Daddy, you will say ' Yes ' ! "

Sir Reginald caught up his little daughter, and set her on his shoulder.

" You shall do something in the camping-out way, Pussy-cat. We'll think how we can manage things for you. But when little folks talk about cooking and sleeping out, they don't quite know what they let themselves in for. There—don't squeeze all the breath out of me. I'll have a talk with Mother, and a look round. No harm in boys undergoing a few hardships, so if they are keen——"

“We are—indeed we are!” shouted Roddy and Ronald in a breath, for they had debated the matter many times together since the half-term.

“Then we’ll see what we can do, and I dare say we can hit upon some plan which will meet all requirements.”

CHAPTER VI.

CAMPING OUT.

MAIDIE and Roddy were wild with delight, Ronald was interested and amused, and Rex good-humouredly tolerant.

“As long as I get some rabbit shooting to keep my hand in, I’m game!” was his way of putting things. “I don’t mind playing the fool in a camp for a bit, if you fellows are keen on it.”

It was Percy, perhaps, who in the end was the least “keen,” greatly to Maidie’s astonishment, as she had thought it his own particular and cherished project.

“It’s what I call nursery camping,” he remarked rather disdainfully. “Everything cut and dried and made easy. I suppose over here nobody knows any better, but it’s

a poor sort of make-believe—with an old farmer told off to look after us, and his house to run off to if we get our feet wet—like a little set of mammy's darlings ! ”

Maidie was rather vexed by his tone, and showed it.

“ Farmer Wheatsheaf is a dear old man, and so is his wife. I'm ever so fond of them ! And I don't think you need grumble. You can sleep in camp every night, unless it's awfully wet or anything. It's for me to grumble, because I've got to go there to sleep every night, and I did so want to sleep in the camp ! ”

For the plan settled upon by the parents for the young camping party was this : There was an outlying farm of Sir Reginald's surrounded by plenty of wild, heather-clad moorland, with a brawling trout stream running through it, and by lonely commons and waste lands, as well as the wide pastures where his herds of ponies were reared. The farmhouse itself was set in a somewhat

isolated position, and was a very favourite spot with Maidie, who had several times stayed there ; as Mrs. Wheatsheaf was her old Nurse's younger sister, and often visited at the nurseries of Beech Hurst, and had helped there more than once on any emergency. Nurse was to have a week's holiday, and Maidie was to be allowed to play at camping with her brothers, on the understanding that the tent was pitched upon some of the pasture or common land within fairly easy reach of the farm, and that the little girl went there each evening at dusk, under the escort of one of the boys, to sleep there and have breakfast next morning before joining the camping party again.

Maidie had been so delighted with the concession to join the boys at all that she could not well complain at this stipulation, though it did rob the prospect of some of its joys and romance. But Rex told her she might think herself lucky, and held out hints

of using the farmhouse himself as his own sleeping-place.

"The tent will do very well for the kids," he remarked, "but I rather think I should prefer a decent bed, like a rational human being. We'll see about that, and whether the young fry can be trusted not to get into mischief if I take my hook."

"Why, what could they do?" asked Maidie, to whom the idea of having Rex as a companion at the farm was pleasant enough; whereupon her big brother had laughed as he answered:

"I think that Percy of yours is a bit of a pickle, and has a rather brilliant gift of imagination and invention."

Maidie was not quite sure whether Rex admired Percy as much as she wished her brothers to do, nor whether Percy thought enough of Rex's quasi-authority as the eldest son and almost a grown man in her eyes. Percy was not quite himself, she thought, now that the boys were back. She could not

exactly say wherein the difference lay ; but he did not seem to be enjoying himself quite so much, and he was not nearly as keen as she had expected over the camping arrangements.

However, these went briskly forward, and were very interesting. Rex and Ronald were both keen fishermen, and undertook to keep the camp supplied with trout. Ronald was to be permitted to try to emulate Rex and take a few shots at the rabbits, of which there were any number scuttling over the commons at dusk, and Rex was a very good shot for his age, and would have no trouble in keeping the larder stocked. When Percy was asked if he could shoot, he answered in an off-hand way, " Of course " ; but Sir Reginald thought that both he and Roddy were too young to be trusted with firearms, and when that fiat went forth the pair looked at one another with a subdued grin, as though they had some other plan for their own amusement.

They were to take with them a couple of ponies, one for Maidie to ride when she wanted, and another as a pack animal.

It was great fun packing up and loading this pony. He did not at all understand what it all meant; and at first the boys were all in a fog as to the proper way of setting to work. Percy stood a little way off, sucking a straw, and looking on with an amused and rather sardonic countenance. Rex had been put in command of the expedition, and Percy thought he'd better let him go about things in his own way. Percy was just a little jealous of this big, handsome, gentlemanly boy who treated him kindly enough, but evidently regarded him as of the same status as Roddy, whereas Percy felt as though his many experiences, and the adventures and journeyings through which he had passed, had put him upon an altogether different level. So now he stood with his hands in his pockets, knowing just where his comrades were going wrong, but not

offering to help, till Ronald came suddenly behind him and slapped him vehemently on the back.

“ Look here, Percy ; don’t you be a young ass ! Come and show us how and help us. We know you can put us up to a lot of wrinkles, and we ain’t too proud to learn. Don’t you be too coxy to teach us either. You’ve got to learn to hit it off with English boys, if you don’t mean to have a beastly time of it at school when you go. We ain’t bad fellows to get on with. Buck up, old chum, and don’t give yourself airs ! ”

Percy laughed suddenly. The words “ old chum ” touched a chord of memory, and as he was really a manly little fellow enough, he had sense to see that he was making rather an ass of himself standing aloof like this, when there was plenty of fun to be had really. He sprang forward, and the next minute he was rolling up, tying, and strapping together in a really neat and workman-like fashion ; the other boys, Rex included,

obeying his orders with alacrity, and getting things taut and ship-shape, whilst Maidie danced around them laughing and clapping her hands, and crying :

“ Oh, Percy, how clever you are ! How well you do it all ! Doesn't he do it splendidly, Rex ? And Joko is as good as gold now. He doesn't mind his load a bit.”

Harmony was completely restored, and the little cavalcade started in fine spirits. The boys' parents came out to watch them off, and promised to drive across to the farm some day soon, and pay them a visit at their camp, wherever it should be.

Maidie rode the smallest of the ponies ; Percy undertook to lead the pack-horse, as they called him ; and the other boys trudged along cheerfully, discussing the prospects of sport and the contributions they would make to the camp kitchen.

Mrs. Wheatsheaf was to supply them with milk, and to make up any deficiencies in their larder ; but they had a great idea of

cooking for themselves, and Percy really did know how to do a great deal of camp cooking ; whilst Sir Reginald had declared that a healthy appetite was the best sauce ever yet invented, and they were none of them likely to fail of obtaining that.

They tramped along blithely, taking short cuts across the fields where the hay-crops had been gathered in. The country grew wilder as they got farther from home, and by noon they had put quite a number of miles between them and Beech Hurst, and were in the midst of heather and the little needle gorse which blooms with it, and kept crossing the little brawling streams which meandered about, or came leaping down from the rougher and wilder craggy country which they saw farther away.

“That’s the sort of place I should like for the camp,” Percy remarked to Roddy ; but Rex was taking a different trend, and Roddy pointed to the gables of the old farmhouse which they now

began to sight. It was set in the midst of wide pasture and arable fields, and was backed by a big stretch of woodland, which was where they were going to camp in the first place. The common and heather-clad country lay all about it, and Roddy told Percy in whispers that beyond the woodlands, in a sort of big valley where the stream came tumbling through, the ponies chiefly grew up, half wild and half cared for, but quite unbroken, until the time came when they were sold off in great numbers to purchasers who came from far and near.

“We’ll have our fun by-and-by,” he said, “when Rex and Ron have got keen on sport, and leave us alone to take care of the camp. That’ll be our chance. Old Joko will make a fine decoy. They’ll come sniffing round him to see what sort of a fellow he is—and then we’ll nip in and do our rough riding. We’ll astonish the natives one of these days, you and I.”

Maidie’s excitement as they entered the

wood was intense. The tall trees grew up thick about them, and the long glades were full of mystery. They might be in the heart of an unexplored forest for all they could see of the world beyond ; and when they reached a spot where some big rocks cropped up, and where a brook came tinkling down over its pebbly bed, whilst the group of stone pines made a circle about the place, and covered the ground with a soft carpet of needles, Rex pulled up short ; Roddy uttered a whoop of delight.

“ This looks about the right sort of place, eh, Percy ? ” quoth Rex, and Percy nodded assent. Next minute Maidie had slipped from her pony, and out of her long riding skirt, and was skipping about like a sprite ; whilst Roddy and Percy set to work to unload the pack-horse, and decide on the best place for setting up the tent.

“ That cranny between those two big rocks will be the very thing ! ” cried Percy. “ We can use the sides of the rock, and make

the tent twice as big ; and it will be cool by day and warm at night. You take your rods, you fellows, and go and catch us some trout for dinner. Roddy and I will get up the camp, and Maidie can collect fir cones and sticks for the fire. I see just the place where we can make a cooking hearth."

They took their orders from him without demur. Rex and Ronald were eager to be off up the brook with their rods. They knew of a pool where trout were nearly always to be taken with a certain fly ; and Maidie and Roddy were charmed to have the setting up of the camp, under Percy's direction, for their task.

The ponies were first hobbled—somewhat to their own surprise—and turned out to feed in a little green patch by the water, slightly lower down. This they quite approved of, and set to work at once upon the lush grass. Percy next collected a few flat stones from the brook, and set them in place in the cranny he had selected for his

cooking stove. Maidie soon had a fine collection of pine cones and dry branches, and a gay little fire was leaping and dancing, with a kettle hung over it to boil.

It was wonderful what a collection of useful articles they set out in array when the packs were undone. Percy and Roddy were both strong, and Percy had plenty of experience ; so it was not a difficult task to get the tent up between the two tall rocks, so conveniently set, slightly leaning towards each other. As Percy had said, this natural shelter enabled them to extend the limits of their tent, and Maidie shouted with rapture as she crept in at the flap doorway, and saw the roomy place they had made of it. When the flap was down it was almost dark ; but when it was up a soft greenish light came in, and by it she was able to arrange the boys' sleeping blankets into nice rolls, and spread the waterproof cover over the floor, and put her saddle in one corner as a sort of support for the back of anyone

sitting there, which was almost as good as an easy chair.

She got their white enamel plates and cups out, and set them in order along a shelf, which had been improvised from a ledge of rock and some pieces of wood ; and by the time that all this was in order the two elder boys returned with a few small trout, whilst Percy had made some oatcake on the stones before the fire.

They had a most delicious meal out in the wood. Maidie wondered why grown-ups, who could do as they liked, ever chose to live in houses at all in the summer time. Percy told them tales of the bush, which made Maidie almost frightened ; and it was rather reassuring then to feel how near, after all, kind Farmer Wheatsheaf's farm was ! In the afternoon, after they had washed up and set the place in order, they played wild Indian and bushranger games for the best part of the time ; and were roused out of their dream-world by the sound of voices

halloing loudly, and found that the farmer had come out in search of them; with a message from his wife, asking them to come to the farm and take tea there, as she had made preparation for them, hoping they would do so.

Maidie clapped her hands in delight. She knew what Mrs. Wheatsheaf's farmhouse teas were like. The "squatters" were all hot and a little tired with their exertions, and, after all, it was rather pleasant not to have to make their own tea and toast first, and then wash up afterwards, fascinating as washing up in the brook had been voted after the mid-day meal.

"We can do a bit of rabbit-shooting after tea, too," spoke the farmer, to whose care the guns had been entrusted by Sir Reginald a few days earlier. "When it begins to get dusk the little beggars are all over the shop. I'll be glad to have some of them potted, if we can get them; but they're terrible sharp if they see a gun. If you haven't got one,

they're as impudent as you like. Wonderful what a lot the dumb creatures know, come to get to know their ways."

The farmhouse was a charming place, and Mrs. Wheatsheaf's tea left nothing to be desired. Hot cakes and cold cakes, jam and honey, strawberries and raspberries, and the thickest cream and the yellowest butter. There were eggs for those who liked them, and a noble ham upon a side table; and the camping-out party discovered that their light luncheon of trout had not done much to appease the healthy appetites engendered by youth and high spirits and exertion, so they put away the good things before them with a zest which satisfied even hospitable Mrs. Wheatsheaf, who expected great things of her guests.

"Now, Ducky, you shall come and see what you'd like put up in yonder basket for the young gentlemen to take away for to-morrow," she said; "and just you look round and see if there's anything as you'd

like to send up yonder to make them more comfortable. Why folks want to sleep uncomfortable-like on the ground, when they've nice beds to go to, is what I can never understand ; but there—there ; 'tis the way of young things. My own were just like it."

And she hustled the willing Maidie off into larder and parlour, whilst Rex and Ronald eagerly pursued the farmer into his special sanctum, where his guns and ammunition were stored, and Roddy nipped Percy by the arm, and whispered :

" Now's our time ! We'll have a look at the ponies."

They escaped unnoticed, and with Pickle and Colin at their heels they tore through the delightful old garden with scarcely a glance at the flowers, and out through the long meadows beyond. Kine were quietly grazing in the pastures, and the shadows were growing long and soft, whilst the birds had burst into their mellow, sweet singing which heralds the coming and the passing

of the day. But the almost magical beauty of the evening did not rouse any sentimental feelings in these two youngsters. They raced on unheeding through the sweeping grass land, till the ground became more broken and uneven, and then rose somewhat abruptly, till as they breasted the long ridge and stood at last upon its crest, Roddy paused and turned a flushed face towards his comrade. He was panting as he spoke :

“ Here we are. This is the place—through this gate and down yonder. You’ll see them soon.”

The gate was set in a long stretch of stout fencing, which stretched away to right and left, and seemed to form a sweeping curve, that evidently enclosed a very considerable tract of country. It looked as if it embraced the whole of a small basin or valley, set between two little bluffs of low-lying undulations ; and this, in fact, was the case, this pleasant little watered valley being the breeding-place and ordinary home

of the Exmoor ponies, which had long been the hobby of the owners of Beech Hurst.

To Percy it was somewhat like an Australian scene in miniature. He had ridden with his father before this into wild valleys, where great herds of horses were growing up more or less wild, and had watched them being driven and herded into the paddocks by the trained stock-men, whose feats he had striven to emulate on a small scale afterwards at home. He plunged down the rough path after Roddy in some excitement, and soon they were creeping softly through a little piece of copse-like underwood, and on emerging from this they looked down upon a fine stretch of meadow land, where quite a hundred ponies of various ages and sizes were feeding and playing together—galloping and gambolling between spells of grazing, and throwing back their heavy manes and forelocks, to stare about them with a certain suspicion if they heard any unwonted sound.

“Work round to windward of them,” whispered Percy. “Jolly little beggars, but a bit wild and shy. We must get ’em used to the look of us first, and then, when we bring Joko along, they’re bound to want to see what he’s up to. They’ll come up then, or some of them, anyhow, fast enough, you’ll see.”

Roddy followed Percy willingly, as he made a little circuit. They called the dogs to heel, and crept cautiously nearer the herd, taking care as far as possible not to make any disturbing noise or to let themselves be seen. Then, when they had in this way got a good deal nearer, Percy began to whistle in a curious way, still keeping well out of sight, and Roddy, peering through the under-wood, saw the ponies throw up their heads, start away for a few paces, and then stop still to listen.

Percy went on whistling, and the little creatures became curious. They slowly drew nearer, and very slowly Percy showed him-

self, not appearing to notice them, and whistling all the while with the same curious wild melody in the tune.

Roddy imitated him, and stood upright, holding Colin's collar, and the ponies stared hard at them, hesitated, started once or twice, but did not turn tail and scamper off.

"Jolly little beggars!" spoke Percy in approval. "That's a famous start. You and I will come again to-morrow without the dogs, and we'll see if we can't get up to 'em then!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE PONIES.

"OH, we're going off pioneering—you'd best clear up the camp, and go fishing with Rex and Ron," advised Percy.

"But why?" asked Maidie slightly affronted. "Why mayn't I go pioneering too?"

"Oh, girls and women are no good at that; you trot along after Rex. He said you might. Take Pickle and Col with you too, as well as Chico."

Maidie was a little offended. She did not think fishing was very interesting, though Rex always had a fund of stories to tell her, and both he and Ronald were very good-natured in teaching her how to throw a fly; but she believed that Percy and Roddy

were "up to something," and her curiosity was aroused.

"What are you going to do, Roddy?" she asked.

"Going pioneering," answered Roddy rather laconically, as he sorted out nails and staples in accordance with Percy's instructions. Percy had a bill-hook in his hand, and was fastening a long roll of wire upon Joko's back, together with sundry posts, which they had got up early to fell and point. Percy turned towards her with an air of command.

"Look here, young 'un; we don't want you with us to-day. You be a sensible kid, and go after Rex and Ron when you've put the camp tidy. We're going prospecting round, and we'll show you what we've done another time; but we don't want you or the dogs to-day. See?"

Maidie put her little head in the air. She was hugely offended, but she was not going to bicker over it.

“Of course I shan’t come if I’m not wanted. I don’t want to be in anybody’s way. I don’t care what you’re doing and I don’t even want to see it ever at all.”

She called to the dogs, and turned her back upon the camp, which was all in a litter after the boys’ breakfast and night there. They had reckoned upon the little sister tidying up and washing up upon her arrival from the farm ; and Maidie had come full of zeal to make things nice. But she had expected that Roddy and Percy would be about there too. Fishermen always wanted to get off early ; but the little boys should stop and help. Now that they meant going off and leaving her alone to do all the dirty work, she did not see the fun of it. She knew exactly where Rex and Ronald would be, and had the dogs to take care of her. The boys might clean up their mess for themselves ; she wasn’t going to be their drudge if they wouldn’t let her share their fun—not she !

“Huffy, is she?” queried Percy philosophically, as the dainty little figure disappeared amid the trees. “All right; it don’t much matter. Girls are too leaky to trust; and you say we’d best keep it dark about this pony-breaking! Would your father cut up rough?”

“Don’t know. You can never tell. He wants us to be manly and do things, and not to funk or get into ‘feather-bed ways,’ as he calls them. He liked well enough for us to rough it out camping. But you never know what they’ll think dangerous and make rules about. It’s best just to do it, and chance the racket if they find out.”

The pair grinned at one another in sympathy. They had got together the things which Percy had decided they would need, including provisions sufficient to sustain them till the evening; and now, taking the bridle of both ponies, though no saddle, and leading Joko with his load, they set out by a short cut, avoiding the farm, for the valley where

the ponies were to be found. Maidie's little steed, finding that he was to be left alone, whinnied eagerly after them, and followed as well as he could with his hobble, so they loosed him and let him come.

"He may be useful, perhaps. I suppose they both belonged once to the herd?"

"Oh, yes; all our ponies were bred in the valley, and Father chose out the best to have broken for us. Joko always loves to go amongst them again. Whenever they want to get any of them up they take him. He's like a kind of decoy-duck, you know."

"That's all right. That's just what we want."

When they entered the valley there were no ponies to be seen at first; but Joko knew instantly where he was, and set up a joyous neighing, in which Maidie's pony joined. Percy had marked the place where he wanted to make his stockade. He had noticed a place where there was a group of trees near to a thick mass of scrub; and he made

straight for the spot, and after tethering the ponies so that they could not dash away, he set himself and Roddy to work might and main, driving in the stakes which they had cut over night and early in the morning, and then fastening the wire by staples both to the trees and to the posts, so that soon they had quite a roomy paddock or stockade formed there, with only a widish doorway free from wires, to which "slip-rails" could be fitted when the place was altogether closed.

It was pretty hard work, though Percy worked like a Trojan, and Roddy emulated him bravely. But by noon it was all done and finished, and by that time there were several ponies, extremely curious to know what was going on, grazing near and coming near to stare, and seemingly asking questions of Joko and Star, with whom they constantly came up to rub noses and exchange playful bites and whinnying greetings.

“ There ! ” exclaimed Percy triumphantly, as the last staple was driven through the last tree trunk, completing the third circuit and finishing the fence completely, “ that’s a good job done. Now we’ll tie up the ponies inside, and go away a little and have our dinner down yonder and watch. We’ll throw down a little rock salt inside, and you’ll see before long some of the little beasties will wander in. Then when they begin to lick the rock salt they’ll find they like it, and they’ll get used to the feel of the place. We must watch our chance, and creep up and get the slip rails in. And then we’ll have our fun.”

The boys sat down with hearty appetites to their repast, and watched the result of their “ trap,” as Roddy called it. Joko and Star were tied up within the stockade, and little by little their wild companions drew near, some looking at them over the wire fence, at which they sniffed suspiciously, others approaching the opening, and walking

a little way in, quickly retreating with tossing heads and flying manes and tails.

But after a few excursions within, finding that no harm befel them, they became curious and bolder, went inside and stayed there awhile, licked tentatively at the odd-looking lumps on the ground, and finding something pleasant to their taste, licked again and yet again.

Percy did not act hastily. For one thing, both he and Roddy were a bit tired, and were quite ready to have a rest before beginning their horse-breaking adventures. They lay along the grass, munching gingerbread, and resting their limbs whilst they watched the manœuvres of the ponies ; and only after quite a good time had passed did Percy say :

“ Now, young shaver, look alive ; creep up very softly that way. I’ll squirm round and meet you the other. Then we’ll up with the rails and get them into place, and we’ll have our prey safe trapped ! ”

The boys were as good as their word. They crept silently up to the doorway, and only one of the unbroken ponies which had wandered in came thundering out again in a flurry of nervousness at hearing the rustle of approaching steps. The other three inside were licking at the salt, or exchanging amenities with Joko and Star, and had not heeded the approach of the boys. Now the bars were slipped into position, and the pair stood looking at their prizes with eager interest.

Then the little creatures took fright, and made a dash for freedom, but were everywhere brought up by wood or wire. They tore round and round, snorting with amazement and fear; but the presence of their own kind gave them a certain confidence. Percy was some time before he attempted any nearer approach. He whistled and he sang; he got the ponies to approach him in curiosity and nervousness, rather than in actual terror, before he attempted anything

else. And when that object was achieved, he dexterously got one by the head, and had the bridle over its ears and the bit in its mouth before the little fellow had fairly realised what was going on.

“Now, Roddy, up with you upon Joko ! I’m going to let the slip-rails down, and I’ll follow on this fellow. Look out for squalls, even on Joko ; he’ll be wildly excited, you’ll see. We shall have to let the rest go ; there’ll be no keeping them in once we’re off ; but that don’t matter. We’ve made a start. Loose Joko and ride him out—leave the rest to me.”

It was awfully exciting—it was also just a little dangerous, but the boys had no thought of fear. This was something like horse-breaking ! Roddy leapt into the enclosure, and, loosing Joko from his tether, vaulted cleverly upon his back. Percy had the rails down by this time, and the stampede began. First the three wild ponies made a dash for liberty, followed by Star ; then

Percy, who had only held his captive with much ado, leaped cleverly upon his back, gave him his head, and went flying off in the wake of the frantically excited four, whilst Joko brought up the rear, plunging and kicking in a fashion which tried Roddy's horsemanship, though he succeeded in maintaining his seat with creditable tenacity.

Percy was now enjoying himself thoroughly. The little rough pony he bestrode, though it was full of pranks and spirit, and mightily astonished at being bestridden in such a fashion, gave him no real trouble. He had had far more perils and adventures in his father's paddocks at home, and now whooped aloud and dug his knees into the pony's sides, and sent it careering along after its freed companions. Joko came up galloping, with his head well down, Roddy somewhat breathless, but triumphant, sticking on something like a monkey.

"You all right? Good. We'll have a long race first, anywhere they like to take

us ; and when this little chap's a bit blown, we'll see how he takes to the bit and bridle."

In time the wild ponies disappeared from view, and Star came trotting back sedately to meet his comrade. Joko was by this time ready to pull up, and Percy's small steed showed signs of having had enough for the moment. Percy gently pulled upon the reins, and though the pony shook his head angrily and nervously, he responded presently to the unwonted pressure, and after a while consented to stand still, dripping with heat and excitement, but saved from real terror by the comforting proximity of the other broken ponies.

Percy slipped from his back and rubbed his face and nose, patted his neck, and called him by endearing names. He seemed to have the knack of establishing friendly relations between himself and any four-footed creature. When he next mounted there was only a slight scrimmage before the pony submitted himself to the will of a rider ;

and Roddy was filled with admiration at Percy's skill and prowess.

"Let me try him," he said, and Percy consented, with the result that Roddy soon measured his length upon the ground, and Percy had some trouble in catching the truant, who might have got clean away had he not tripped up in the hanging reins, and got himself so tangled that the captor was able to come up with him.

Nevertheless, in spite of his tumble, Roddy was full of ardour to continue these somewhat perilous adventures, and for three days Maidie scarcely saw anything of this pair. She was too proud to ask what they were doing. She ignored them almost completely when they turned up in the evenings. She was enjoying herself pretty well, though scarcely as much as she had expected in the camp; and upon the fourth morning, when Percy and Roddy disappeared in the same silent and mysterious fashion, and Rex and Ronald found her sitting alone in the

camp, with only the dogs for company, they began to grow rather indignant.

“Where do the fellows get to? And why do they leave you like this? I thought the camp was a sort of game you youngsters wanted to play at together. You and Roddy are always as thick as thieves. What’s the matter, Puss? Have they been bullying you?”

For the tears had sprung to the little girl’s eyes, and ran suddenly over her cheeks.

“They don’t want me because I’m a girl. I don’t know what they do, but they say I’m no good—Percy does. Roddy would take me, I know, but he’s afraid of Percy. I hate Percy! I wish he’d never come.”

“Oh, come! It’s not as bad as all that!” spoke Rex consolingly. “Percy’s not a bad little chap, only he’s got a bit too much swagger. Suppose we go and prospect after them, and see what they’re up to? Where’s your pony, Maidie? You shall ride, and we’ll take you pioneering after them.

I bet the Pickle and Chico between them can follow their trail. We'll be backwoodsmen ourselves for a change ! ”

Maidie cheered up instantly. Fishing was dull ; but Rex was always nice and kind, and if he and Ronald would take her for a day in the woods it would be charming.

“ Star and Joko always go with the boys. They didn't come back at all last night. I believe they have got a camp of their own somewhere, and won't tell me about it. They won't have the dogs, but they always take the ponies.”

“ Tell you what ! ” suddenly exclaimed Ronald. “ I bet they're after the Exmoors over yonder ! Roddy always was keen on horse-breaking ; and he swaggered a good bit after last *exeat*, and he's been awfully keen on vaulting and all sorts of things like that. I had a notion he'd got a card up his sleeve somewhere. I expect he and Percy are after the ponies.”

“ Oh, I expect they are ! ” cried Maidie,

"Percy is so awfully fond of horses and riding, and what he calls rough riding! But why didn't they tell me? I'd have loved to see them at it, and I shouldn't have been in their way."

"I suspect they wanted to keep it dark," said Rex. "Dad has his own ideas about the ponies. Roddy knows, if Percy doesn't, that we shouldn't be allowed sky-larking there without Farmer Wheatsheaf or anybody to look after us. Those half-wild little beggars can be a bit dangerous. Percy is used to that sort of thing, of course, but I don't think he'd have got leave to play his jinks if he'd asked."

They went straight to the valley where the Exmoors were usually herded through the summer, and were not long in sighting the fugitives. Down in a green glade Percy was to be seen, careering along on one pony, and seeking to fling a noose over the neck of another—lasso fashion. Roddy was on Joko—he had not yet succeeded in mastering

the trick of keeping his seat upon any of the unbroken herd—and was doing his part in trying to head off the pony they were seeking to capture, and prevent its breaking away. Both boys were riding very well. Rex and Ronald could not but view them with admiration. They were plucky little fellows, and no mistake. But the eldest brother felt that they were going rather far in their thirst for adventure and amusement. This sort of thing might be done with impunity ; but a bad accident might happen any moment. And what would he feel like in presence of his parents, if he had to confess that he had known what was going on, and had not put a stop to it, or reported it at head-quarters ?

Rex hated anything like tale-bearing—every manly and generous boy does. But, as prefect in his school, he was used to the sense of responsibility where others were concerned, and he had been charged by his father with a general oversight of the younger

boys during this period of camping out. He felt he had been perhaps a little remiss in not looking more quickly after the doings of this pair ; but he had imagined that they were simply exploring the woods and seeing what sort of adventures they could invent for themselves, and he had not felt any anxiety about them heretofore.

“Hallo, there goes Roddy ! That was something like a cropper !” shouted Ronald, beginning to rush down the hill. “Good thing he wasn’t kicked by that other little beggar—it was a near shave ! Oh, he’s all right. He’s up again. Roddy is always rather like a ball of india-rubber—nothing hurts him. I say, I’d like to take a hand in that show ! Why did they keep it so precious dark ?”

“Look here, Ron,” said Rex ; “you’ve got to stand by me this show. I don’t think Father would care about having us turn horse-breakers out here, away from everything and everybody. Percy won’t

understand—he's been bred up to it; but you know what Mother would say if she heard, and things might happen—Roddy's brains were nearly smashed in that time! It's too risky. We must tell 'em so, and you must back me——"

"Of course I'll back you. I don't suppose Dad would care about it. It's fine sport, but——"

Rex nodded. He was beginning to grow into the knowledge that there were other things to think about as one grew older than just sport and fun. Boys don't talk about these feelings; but they know what they are like. Rex hated to be a spoilsport, but he knew that either he must get the youngsters to give up this particular amusement, or else report it to Sir Reginald.

Percy was just a little inclined to be glum and defiant at first, but Rex was really very nice about it, admired his riding, admired the stockade, offered to bring Sir Reginald here to look at things and give

his verdict, so that it was impossible to be vexed long.

Roddy looked at Percy, and Percy at Roddy, and finally the colonial boy gave answer :

“No, don’t do that. We’ve had our fun. We’ll come back to camp now, and do other things. Your mother might have the funks. Don’t tell her. We’ll let the ponies be.”

And as he spoke he gave Roddy one rather queer little glance out of the corner of his eye, which, being interpreted, meant :

“Let old Rex have his own way now. We’ll find some way of being even with him one day !”

CHAPTER VIII.

BIRTHDAYS.

"I THINK we were rather beastly to her, you know," said Percy with contrition. "Let's make it up somehow now."

"Let's do something for her birthday," suggested Roddy. "By the time she gets home it'll be just coming. She and Ron have birthdays close together. We always keep them together and do something jolly."

"That's just the thing!" cried Percy eagerly. "Let's think of some things she wants, and have them all ready."

"You're good at making things with tools, I daresay," said Roddy, who had great ideas as to Percy's capabilities and attainments.

"Oh, not bad, as fellows go," answered

Percy, with some complacency of manner.

“What would please the little 'un best?”

“Well, I've promised this long time to mend up her big dolls'-house. It's rather splitting up the side and getting shaky. Rex calls it 'a settlement,' and frightens Maidie a bit. I'm always meaning to mend it up, and do some painting, but I never get the time.”

“Oh, well, we'll do that—for one thing. Rather a jolly job, too. But that's not enough. We must make her some things, too. What would she like?”

“Well, let's think. She's very fond of her birds and her rabbits.”

“I'll make her a model hutch. I saw one in some place I went to once—forget just where—awfully jolly sort of thing, with different compartments, and doors at the back for getting at it to clean out. I know just what it was like. I could easily make her one. And don't you think she'd like a sort of aviary for her birds?”

“ Why, yes—I daresay she would. But how could that be done ? ”

“ Oh, as easy as winking. With all the queer unused rooms you have here, we’ll soon rig one up for summer use. Get a lot of wire, and wire in one of those recesses in the playroom, where we can make as much mess as we like. You’ll have to wire the window too, but so as it could be opened behind the wire, and there must be a door for her to get in to do things. But it would be jolly to have the birds flying about in a little room of their own. And perhaps we might make one out in the garden too. They do in hot countries, you know—half of wire and half of wood. The birds like it awfully.”

“ That’s the sort of thing Maidie would like no end—an out-door aviary. And it would be a jolly thing to do, too. I’m sure Mother will give us money for wire netting, or let us have it and the wood for the hutch, and the paint for the dolls’-house

from the carpenter's shop. We'll go and talk to her—come along ! ”

The two boys rushed off in search of Lady Madeline, brim full of enthusiasm over this last new idea.

The camp had now been broken up for more than a fortnight. It had lasted some ten days or so, and then a spell of thundery weather with heavy rains had driven the young pioneers back to their normal life behind solid walls.

On the whole they had enjoyed the camping ; but there had been a little friction over the incident of the ponies. Percy thought Rex had been interfering and tiresome, though, as he had had three days' fine fun, he did not specially care about continuing his horse-breaking amusements. Roddy was more annoyed about this, because he had not really tried his skill upon the unbroken ponies so far. Percy rather wisely advised him to stick to Joko, whom he could ride, and ride well, and bide his

time till he was in full practice before he essayed anything more adventurous. Each day Roddy had found himself more and more at home upon the bare-backed steed, and less inclined to slip off when Joko played his pranks. He was looking forward to emulating Percy in time, and was a good bit vexed at this sudden termination to their sport.

Maidie had been hurt in her mind at their having kept this interesting secret from her. She was eager to visit the stockade, and wanted very much to see how they enticed the ponies inside, and how they trapped them. But Roddy was rather cross, and told her that she was a little spoil-sport, and didn't deserve to be told anything or shown anything. So the camp life had been a little strained all round, and, though they had had plenty of fun in spite of small squabbles and differences, they were not so particularly sorry when it broke up and they went back.

Then Maidie almost immediately went off with Ronald to pay a short visit to some cousins, whom they stayed with occasionally. Rex was paying a visit to some school friend, and Percy and Roddy were left to their own devices for the time being.

It was then they discovered that they missed Maidie a good bit. It occurred to Percy now that they had not always been quite kind to her, and had rather put upon her in the camp, and made her the drudge whilst they had enjoyed themselves at ease. She had been very willing and good about it, as they remembered now, and both were eager upon her return to "make it up" in style, with sundry offerings of a handsome and attractive character.

Lady Madeline was always pleased for her boys to make themselves useful—to employ their own hands and their own ingenuity about any task they took in hand.

"You shall have all the materials you want," she told them; "I will give orders

about it. I think there are plenty of tools belonging to you boys, and if any of them want repairing it shall be done for you. Then I hope you will set to work with a will, and have everything nicely ready for Maidie's return. I am sure it will please her very much, and you will find that the holidays pass all the more pleasantly for having some regular occupation."

The boys ran off in great spirits to select such raw materials as they wanted, and they carried away their spoil in great glee to a huge attic, where they meant to carry on their tasks.

The attic was above the play-room, where the dolls'-house stood, and where they proposed wiring off a small aviary; though they intended also to make one out of doors for real summer use. A narrow twisting staircase led from the one room to the other, and they ran down this to have a look at the dolls'-house before commencing operations.

“Tell you what,” said Percy: “it wants all taking to pieces, and painting inside and out, and putting together again. We’ll empty it out, and take it upstairs and have a regular go at it. We’ll paint the rooms all different colours. These rubbishy bits of raggy paper shall all come off. We’ll have a red dining-room and a sea-green drawing-room, and the bedrooms shall be pink and blue. I’m sure Nurse will make us some curtains for the windows to match, and I’ll put up a cosy corner in the drawing-room, and make things awfully swagger! Can’t think what girls can see in a dolls’-house to amuse them; but to make one isn’t bad fun!”

So Maidie’s dolls’-house was divested of its inmates and furniture. Some of this fragile stuff was broken by the way; but Percy only laughed.

“Silly little gimcracks! But I’ll soon stick them together again when we get to the glue-pot stage. Fine house as houses

go. Yes, pull its roof right off—and its front too ; then we'll get it upstairs better, and regularly overhaul it."

So the work of preliminary destruction went on merrily, and the wrecked shell of the house was carried upstairs and set down. Percy decreed that for satisfactory painting purposes it had better all be pulled to pieces, and when that was accomplished they stripped the walls of every remnant of paper, and rubbed them down ready for painting.

Then, feeling they had done a very good day's work, they left the attic and went for a long walk ; and the next morning, as the paint-pots had not yet arrived, they went out riding ; and only when Lady Madeline asked how they were getting on did they remember all the projects that had been so much in their heads yesterday.

"Oh, we're going to start along now," answered Percy eagerly. "Come along, Roddy. I've got an idea about that outside aviary. We'll use the back wall of

the thatched summer-house for one side, and we'll build it out from there. It'll face the sun, which birds like ; and that big drooping willow tree will give a nice lot of shade. We must get a lot of rough wood to start with, and some long nails. And then when we've got the framework up we'll put the wire netting over. We'll have a roof, too—a thatched roof would look best to match the summer-house. We'll see about that as we get along. Come on, and let's collect what we want ! ”

The summer-house was in that portion of the grounds mainly given up to the children, and thither they dragged a quantity of rough timber, and Percy got a pick and set himself to the task of making holes for the uprights at the corners. But the ground was hard and the progress was slow, and by the time the dusk fell they had only just got the two uprights set in position.

“ That's a good start, anyhow,” quoth Percy with satisfaction. “ We can get up

early to-morrow and have a long day at it."

But next morning they both slept till they were called ; and then Roddy remembered that a cricket match was to be played in the neighbourhood, so they must needs start off to watch it ; and the play was so interesting and exciting that they stopped the whole day, getting dinner at a friend's house ; and it was almost dusk before Beech Hurst saw them again.

And so it went on from day to day. Sometimes a great ardour would seize upon them, and they would paint industriously or hammer vigorously for quite a long time together. But then something attractive would come to distract them, or they would get tired of their tasks, one after the other ; and some new idea would strike them—such as the making of a gigantic kite for Ronald, which occupied them two whole days, and then stood half finished against the attic wall, as Percy said, to dry ; but

really because they were tired of their task, and had doubts as to the flying capacity of the creature.

Things did get on, but only slowly ; and days ran by with a swiftness that was little short of astonishing. Percy was often conscious that Roddy would have pegged away more industriously had he been alone ; but he could not resist the tempting suggestions made by his companion of a swim in the lake or a ride across country, or even a lazy afternoon amid the heather ; and so the days fled by and Maidie was expected back, and not one of the presents and peace-offerings was ready. Of late Percy's head had been very full of a new plan, suggested by the sight of some tempting-looking crags which they had passed upon one of their rides.

“ What a place for a bandit hold ! ” he had exclaimed, and ever since he had been conning over some new and adventurous game to be worked out later—perhaps

after Maidie's return—wondering whether they might be allowed to make a camp amongst the rocks ; more of a real camp, without having things made so easy for them, and play bushrangers or robber-chieftains, and make raids upon make-believe passing travellers.

With a mind at work on matters like this, the trivial tasks at home seemed mean and foolish. Percy would get Roddy out into some shady spot, and talk of the schemes forming in his head.

“ We ought to catch some of the ponies—half-wild ones, you know—and make them scramble up the rocks to our fastness. They could if they weren't shod ; and some of them are half-broken already. We could have a splendid time up there, you and I together, and Maidie could be a traveller, and we could carry her off. She'd like that awfully. And if the other fellows wouldn't be muffs and peach, we might have awful larks ; but I'm not sure if we'd best let

them know anything about it ; they're so Mammy-ridden, that pair."

Roddy was not quite sure that he liked this criticism of his elder brothers ; but he said nothing. He was eager to follow Percy to his fastness, and play the bandit game. And when that very afternoon Lady Madeline came to look for them, telling them that Maidie was coming home next day, and that the double birthday would be celebrated upon the day following, they looked at each other somewhat aghast, for of all the plans they had made not one had yet been carried out.

"Now take me to see what you have done," added the lady, with a kind smile. "I have seen so little of you that I am sure you have been busy somewhere. Maidie will be so pleased that you have been thinking of her. Will you let me see the results of your labours ? "

Percy scrambled to his feet, rather red in the face. Roddy got hold of his mother's hand, saying :

“Come along; there’s plenty to see, but nothing quite done yet. We had a lot of irons in the fire, you see, and things had to be done in turns; whilst the paint dried, and—and——”

He looked at Percy to help him out, but Percy said nothing. Lady Madeline, however, let herself be taken first to where the outdoor aviary was in course of construction. The frame was put together rather cleverly, and the posts had been painted a vivid green; but there was no wire fixed, and the heather roof was only half done. It had been rather fidgety work, and Percy had grown tired of it, though what was done was neat and firm.

Indoors it was much the same. The skeleton of the dolls’-house lay about the interior of the different rooms painted with care and some skill, but nothing finished—nothing put together. The big kite still leaned against the wall in an incomplete condition, and the rabbit-hutch, though

cleverly designed, and in part rather neatly executed, remained in a half-finished state, as it had done for the past ten days.

Lady Madeline looked about her, examined the quality of the work, and then, looking at Percy with a smile, she said, "I think colonial boys must be very clever with their fingers and their tools ; but do they never finish one thing before they begin another ? Is that how work gets done, or does not get done, over there ?"

"We had such a lot to do, and the paint had to dry thoroughly in between, and some things took such a time," began Roddy ; but Percy said never a word. He remembered what his own parents had told him of his besetting fault at home. He remembered how he had hated the sound of his name when one or another had said to him, "Oh, Percy Vere, will you never learn to persevere in anything ?" And he glanced up at Lady Madeline, half expecting to hear some such words fall from her lips ; but

when she met his glance she put a hand upon his shoulder, and said gently :

“ It is not only you, Percy ; we all like the beginnings of things so much better than the steady work of finishing. But that is not the way in which the successes of the world are made, and it is not the way God works. Do you ever stop to think, my children, what would happen to us all if our Father in Heaven ever got tired of caring for the beautiful world He has made, or the creatures He has formed to live there ? ”

And after just putting that question, Lady Madeline went away, leaving the boys with all the strew of unfinished work about them. And after a long, pregnant silence Percy exclaimed :

“ I’ll finish that aviary downstairs in the recess, and have it all ready for Maidie’s birds to-morrow, if I have to sit up all night to do it.”

Maidie returned the following evening,

but did not visit the play-room till next morning—the birthday itself; and then Percy and Roddy led her in with an air of triumph and pride.

Maidie looked round, and gave a little cry of joy.

“ Oh, my dickies, my dickies ! What a dear, ducky little place ! Oh, Percy, oh, Roddy, how clever of you ! ”

Percy afterwards confessed to Roddy that he felt a humbug at being praised for this trifling bit of work. But the wire netting had been nailed in place over the recess and over the window behind, which could stand open, if desired, without danger of the birds' escape. To-day it had all been decorated with flowers, and a certain amount of brilliant painting on a few outer bars had given a gala appearance to the extemporised aviary. But the chief attraction was a new and gaudily coloured parroquet, which the boys had clubbed together to buy the previous day; and Maidie was so entranced by the

aviary and the new favourite that it was long before she noted the absence of her big dolls'-house, or that the door into this wired recess was not yet properly made, though its position was indicated.

"We'll get that all right another day," said Percy. "We hadn't quite time to finish it off ; we wanted to go into Writlington after the new bird. The baby-house is being done up. You shall have it back quite soon now ; but it's bad workmanship to put on one coat of paint till the other is quite dry, and besides—I'll own up—we were a bit lazy. It got hot, and things turned up to do ; but it's all right, and you shall have it back soon."

Maidie was not disposed to be exacting, though she did miss her dolls'-house. It was exciting to hear that it was being painted and repaired ; but the boys would not let her see it, telling her she must wait till it was done.

"And Percy's got a splendid new idea,"

Roddy whispered. "We've found a crag and a sort of cave, and we're going to live there, and be bandits and bushrangers ; and, if you're up to larks, we'll carry you off some day as a prisoner. And won't they have a jolly big hunt before they find you again."

Maidie's eyes were bright with excitement and anticipation. This was almost better than birthday presents.

CHAPTER IX.

BUSHRANGERS.

"Oh, jolly!" cried Percy, cutting a caper.

"Jolly that Daddy and Mummy are going away?" spoke Maidie with an air of reproof.

"Oh, well, you know, it's only a week or so; and it'll just give us the chance we wanted."

"What for?"

"Why, for scooting off somewhere, and making a camp and being bandits or bush-rangers, you know."

Maidie's eyes began to glow.

"You'll let me come with you?"

"Don't think we can. Somebody's sure to stop it; but we'll let you know where we settle, and we'll carry you off."

Maidie clapped her hands in ecstasy.

“ Oh, how lovely ! I’ll be a traveller, and you’ll come and—what do they call it in bushranger books ?—you’ll stick me up ! Isn’t that it ? ”

“ Yes ; you must ride out alone, if you can ; or, if not, with old Heavysides. We’ll make a rush, and he’ll never be able to keep up. We’ll have our faces blacked ; but of course he’ll know it’s us ; so he won’t really be frightened about you. He’ll have to go home to get somebody younger and more active to run us down, and whilst he’s gone we can break camp and bolt and give them a dance after us.”

Maidie’s eyes were sparkling. That would be something like an adventure ; and it was so charming that the boys wanted her. Carrying her off before the very eyes of the sober old coachman, who rode out with her when she had no other escort, would be great fun for the boys and entrancing for Maidie. And as Mother would not be at

home to feel the least anxious, she would not a bit mind trying to elude capture for a whole day and night—perhaps longer. To sleep out in the woods had always been Maidie's ambition in hot weather, and she had been much disappointed that she always had to go to the farm at night when the boys were camping out. But this would make amends for everything ; and she said good-bye to her parents with much less than the usual reluctance. What a delightful tale she would have to tell Mother on her return, of her adventure with bandits, and her night in the " bush " !

Next morning at breakfast, which Maidie took with the boys in the dining-room, Roddy suddenly spoke—as had been settled beforehand.

" We're going camping, Percy and I. Either of you fellows want to come ? "

Roddy knew quite well that Rex and Ronald had made their own plans for the next week, and that camping out, after

their recent experiences of it, had no very great attractions for them, but he made his suggestion with an air of good-fellowship.

Rex looked up quickly from his letters.

“Camping? Did you ask Dad about that? Where do you want to camp?”

“Why, we thought that old ruined water-mill down by Quarry Wood would be a decent sort of place. Save a lot of trouble not having to carry a tent; and there’s fishing handy, and jolly walks, and first-rate bathing. And this hot weather it would be just the thing.”

“Did Dad know you were going?”

“N—not exactly. We did say something once about the old mill. He said we might bathe in the pool if we didn’t stop in too long. Percy swims like a good ’un, and I’m not bad. I want to practise. Dad likes us to do that sort of thing. He didn’t mind a bit last time we went camping; why should he bother now?”

Rex made no immediate answer. There

was nothing very audacious in the suggestion. Sir Reginald had always encouraged his sons to be hardy and self-reliant and independent—within reasonable bounds. The eldest son of the house, now in a sort of temporary charge of his younger brothers, had no wish to stretch his prerogative, or make himself a nuisance; but he felt a certain qualm of uneasiness, and wished the younger pair had broached the matter to the father before he left.

“You could write and ask, and he’d wire an answer; but I suppose it would be ‘Yes.’”

“Of course it would,” said Roddy confidently. “What’s the use of bothering? Besides, we did say something, didn’t we, Percy? We hadn’t thought of camping there; but he told us how he’d spent a night there himself once, hunting for moths, and watching the owls. We said we’d like to do it too, and he never said a word against it.”

That seemed to settle the matter pretty well. But Rex had one more word of caution.

“Don’t you get playing the fool over those ponies. Dad likes your pluck, Percy, but he doesn’t want anybody’s brains kicked out ; and there’s always a bit of risk, you know.”

“We shan’t be near the ponies,” spoke Roddy.

“Well, you just keep away from them—that’s all. I don’t suppose there’s any reason why you shouldn’t camp in the old mill. It’s quite a jolly place. I shouldn’t mind being there a spell myself, if Ron and I hadn’t other things to do.”

That very day the boys set out, and Maidie drove with them in the little light cart for a great part of the way, carrying stores of provisions for them.

There was no handy farmhouse to supply their needs here ; so they had to take biscuit and cake, tinned milk and potted meat,

and tea and sugar with them. Also Maidie insisted on putting in some blankets and old cushions, though Percy laughed at the idea of bushrangers wanting luxuries like these. Nevertheless, Maidie declared they would be very glad of them when the time came for going to sleep—as, indeed, they were.

The little cart, light as it was, could not get quite up to the old mill, so tangled and overgrown had the old disused road become; but they could hear the fall of the water over the mill-dam as they halted, Maidie said she *must* just come and see the place again, and help carry their stores in; and so the pony was tied up, and all the children laded themselves with what Percy called “swag,” and they stumbled along over the rough ground till they reached the tumble-down, picturesque old mill.

There was not much of it left, to be sure, but still enough to give shelter on warm August nights. Maidie was rather shocked at the dirt and cobwebs and *batty* odour of

the place ; but Percy pulled out a great bunch of heather and was soon sweeping vigorously away at the walls and floor. Maidie insisted that the little cushions of the cart should also be brought in to make a sort of divan against the wall, and before she left the place had really assumed an air of modest comfort, which in her eyes was simply charming.

“ It’s the duckiest little place. I must come to-morrow and see you. And then we’ll arrange about how you can carry me off. I suppose, then, I must be riding ? ”

“ Yes ; we’ll settle all that when we’ve shaken down a bit,” answered Percy ; “ and we must find a place to hide you in, too, as they’ll come straight here after you. There’s no such great hurry. We’ll be here for a week at least ; and you can come and see us. And when we’re ready we’ll tell you.”

Roddy drove Maidie most of the way home, only leaving her when she got upon

the familiar ground of their father's property, where she was quite safe to drive back alone. When he reached the old mill again Percy was absent, and did not come in for a fairish time. He was hot and breathless from brisk running when he appeared.

"I've been marking down a couple of ponies," he said, throwing himself down along the divan, and stretching out eagerly for the cup of tea Roddy had been preparing. "One can cut across to them in a bee-line, and it's not as far as you'd think. It's full moon to-night, and not a cloud in the sky. We'll go out stalking. We'll get one for certain, and perhaps both. Then, when they're shut up in that bit of a stable yonder—I've got the door on its hinges all right enough now—and we handle them and feed them, and they are right away from the herd, they'll tame down fast enough."

"But—I say—I thought we'd promised not to touch the ponies?"

"I never did, young duffer, nor you

either. We were never told to obey that Rex chap as though he were the Lord High Everything, as he seems to think ! We're not going to do anything dangerous, which is all your Dad objects to. You just leave it to me, and I'll show you. It's as safe as a house ; and when we've picked the two best broken of the herd, we'll soon have them as docile as lambs ; and you can take an unshod pony, whose feet are hard like these chaps', into no end of places where shod ones would slip and fall. We'll have larks ! no fear. But don't you be Rex-ridden, or it'll spoil all the fun."

Roddy was as eager as his comrade, and by no means desirous of showing submission to Rex, though he did not resent his slight exercise of authority as Percy seemed to do. By the time that the moon was well up, and they had had a good rest and a good supper, Roddy was as eager as his companion ; and taking bridles over their arms, and a longish rope to serve as a lasso in

case of need, the two young bushrangers sallied forth together, intent upon the capture of a pair of steeds.

Percy knew exactly what he wanted, and how he meant to go about his task. He had on the former occasion "sampled" the herd, as he called it; and had picked out a pair of not quite unbroken ponies, who had had on a halter before, and were not quite strange to handling, and who had both been into the stockade, when they had put in Joko as a decoy, and had submitted with tolerably good grace to be ridden by him afterwards.

Percy very well knew the difference between a perfectly unbroken pony and one who had partially submitted his will to human coercion; as also he distinguished rapidly between high spirit and vice. He had the keen insight where horses are in question which seems the heritage of the young colonial, and Roddy followed him with implicit confidence.

It was exciting and interesting work. They had to approach the groups of ponies to the windward, and very cautiously. At night suspicious sounds frightened the creatures more easily than by day. One lot stampeded away before they had got at all near; and though the moon was bright, Roddy found it hard to distinguish colour in the herd, and wondered how it was that Percy's eyes seemed to see so much more easily than his.

"That's the fellow I want," suddenly spoke Percy, pointing cautiously towards a group, some of which were lying in the shelter of some rocks, whilst others munched the herbage close beside them; "the big one eating, with his quarters towards us. I know him by the curious white splash upon his side. Look here, Roddy; you creep along that way, so as to head him back if he sees me and makes a bolt. If I could just creep along those rocks in that black shadow and get up that way, I might leap

upon his back and nab him before he knew I was there."

"But he wouldn't be bridled even," said Roddy. "Would it be safe?"

Percy showed his white teeth in a grin.

"I'll give him a bit of a dressing, and then he'll let me slip the bridle on. He's a jolly chap, that one, and he knows my voice and my hands by this. We'll soon be on terms again. Getting up to him is the trouble. But we'll see."

Roddy crept with creditable caution and stillness along the track indicated, and watched with breathless interest for the *dénouement*.

Presently he heard a soft, bird-like twittering noise, which for a moment made the pony with the splashed side raise his head and stare about him; but though the noise continued, it was so like a bird-call of some sort that it did not appear to disturb his mind. He began feeding again, close beside the big rock which gave shelter from the

slight chill of the summer night air ; and he pawed a little as though meditating lying down there for awhile.

Just as the pony began the pawing movement, Roddy saw something move upon the rock. The bird-like note had sounded at intervals. Roddy was convinced it was Percy, covering the sound of his approach by making a sleepy twittering noise, as birds disturbed at night sometimes do.

“ Oh—bravo ! Bravo ! ”

The exclamation broke from him suddenly and unawares. He had not seen just how it had been accomplished ; but Percy was on the pony's back, and the race along the valley in the moonlight had began. Percy shouted back a triumphant call. The pony put down his head, flourished his heels, and vanished like a streak. Roddy leapt downwards and gave chase. He knew Percy would keep the runaway along the wide grass track through the centre of the glade, and turn him at the first possible sign of

submission. He heard his voice coaxing and making what Maidie called "nice noises," such as horses understand, till distance drowned the sound. He was in no fear for his companion.

"Wish I could ride like that. But I will one of these days."

And presently pony and rider re-appeared, the pony wearing his bridle now with a fairly good grace, and responsive up to a certain point to his rider's will.

"That'll do for one night," quoth Percy. "We'll take him back, rub him down and feed him, and put him through his paces to-morrow by himself. That's the best thing to do. Then next night, or the night after, we'll get him a companion, and they'll be as jolly as sandboys together."

Maidie did not get out again to the old mill next day, for some little friends came in the morning to carry her off for a day with them, which she enjoyed very much, as she was not fond of loneliness; and

having had a companion in Percy for so long, felt it all the more when there was no boy about the house.

But the day following she got George, the stable-boy, to drive her part of the way towards the mill, and with Chico and Colin for companions — Col carrying the basket with the cake and some chocolate which she had brought the bushrangers as a peace-offering—she finished the journey alone, sending back the little cart, as she meant to walk home, with the boys for her companions most of the way.

The bushrangers were not at home when she arrived, and she shook her head over the litter they had already contrived to make about them. The fire had not been cleaned out or the ashes swept up ; their sleeping blankets lay all crumpled up and untidy, and nothing had been washed up, she could see, from the time they had started the new camp.

“ Boys are dirty, caddly creatures,” she

remarked gravely, culling a word from her old Nurse's vocabulary; "but I suppose they are made that way and can't help it. I must tidy up for them, I suppose."

The heather brush extemporised by Percy served its purpose fairly well. The floor was easily swept, all the dust and litter being just driven over the door-sill. Rugs were shaken and folded, and a bright wood fire was easily kindled, as the boys had collected wood and fir cones in fair quantities.

The kettle was also filled; and with hot water things were easily washed up. Maidie had always been very neat and clean with her dolls and their arrangements, and Nurse had encouraged her to learn the right way of sweeping and brushing and folding, so that the putting to-rights of an untidy place was rather a pleasure to her, and she did it methodically and well.

"Now I'll make them some tea—they're sure to come in as thirsty as fishes and hungry as hunters. I wonder if they'll have

brought home any prizes yet ? How exciting if they've 'stuck up' anything ! ”

Maidie had just got things ready for a nice tea, when she was startled by the sound of horses' feet, and jumped up in just a little nervous fright. She knew the boys had no ponies here, and had been forbidden to meddle with the wild herd, so it could not be them. Yet if not, who was coming ?

She looked round her half frightened, a jumble of bushranger stories of Percy's telling crowding into her brain. Then she heard a laugh and a whoop—and the colour came rushing back into the little pale face.

“ It is Percy—it's Percy and Roddy ! ” She rushed out to meet them, and there they were swaggering into camp on two rough, wild-eyed ponies, with tossing manes and flowing tails, who started and swerved at the sight of the little white figure, whilst their riders tumbled off laughing, and led them away to a small shed which they had evidently mended up as a stable.

“Where did you get them?” cried Maidie, running after them.

“Oh, that’s bushranger secrets!” laughed Percy; “we’re bound to be mounted in our trade. Couldn’t carry it on nohow without. How on earth could we carry you off if we hadn’t a mount ourselves—eh, young ’un? We’ll be all ready for that in about three days more. We’ve got the horses now; next we’ve got to find the hiding-place; then—the captive!”

Maidie forgot her misgivings in admiration and anticipation.

“Oh, how lovely! I never thought of your riding to take me; but of course that’s much more romantic! What darling ponies! They look very much like Daddy’s Exmoors.” Maidie pulled up short, and Roddy began to laugh. She decided to ask no questions. After all, what did it matter if it was all safe? It was only hurting themselves that the grown-ups were afraid of.

“Come in to tea!” she cried. “I’ve got it all ready for you.”

And when they saw the neat little room, the bright fire, and the tempting tea, Percy smote her on the back in hearty comrade fashion and cried :

“I say, Roddy, when we’ve got our captive, we shan’t be in any hurry to let her go again!”

CHAPTER X.

TAKEN CAPTIVE.

“YOUR pony, Missy ; yes, to be sure ! And you will want somebody to go with you, since all the young gentlemen are away ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t think I mind about that, Gregory,” answered Maidie smilingly, to the old coachman, whom Percy had nicknamed Heavysides, a tribute to the portliness of his figure.

“ Maybe not, Missy, only my lady likes somebody to be with you. But I’ll go myself, since there’s not much doing in the stables, if so be you don’t want to go too fast for my old bones.”

Maidie laughed and dimpled with glee.

“ I think that would do finely, Gregory. I like you so much better than any of the

grooms," and the old man beamed with pleasure at the implied compliment of his little mistress, not guessing at the spirit of mischief lying beneath the demure and merry exterior.

"I'll run and get ready!" cried Maidie, dancing away, "and you'll saddle the horses as quickly as you can."

All was going splendidly. Rex and Ronald were off for a day's cricket at a house five miles away. They would not be home till quite late, for there was to be a supper afterwards, and nobody would think of going till eight or nine o'clock, when the moon would be up to light them all back.

If Maidie had been carried off by the bushrangers—whom Gregory would know to be the younger boys—he would not be at all afraid about her, and, in fact, nobody would begin to worry at all till it got to be dusk, and then perhaps Nurse would make a fuss. But until Rex got home very likely nothing would be done; and he and

Ronald would be certain that she was all safe in the ruined mill, and probably would not think it worth coming after till the next morning. And when they did come, they would find it empty and deserted, and then would begin the hunt and the chase, which the fugitives would watch, hidden away in their eerie amongst the crags, where their robber hold was perched.

This was how they had planned it all out, and everything seemed to be going splendidly. The little girl and her attendant rode soberly along the shady lanes. Maidie chose their route, and Gregory told her tales about horses and ponies he had known in the past, and how clever and sensible these had often been. He had a never-failing fund of anecdote about four-footed creatures, and Maidie was fond of hearing them. She had Chico, Pickle, and Colin running along with them, and was in great spirits. She had rather a big bundle which Gregory had unsuspectingly fastened to her saddle for

her. He guessed it was something for the "young gentlemen out camping," and so it was; but he was not quite prepared for the fashion in which it was to be annexed.

As they were riding along past a little bit of wood, with some rather wild country lying ahead of them—moorland, and some craggy ridges of rock rising abruptly and suddenly, like small fortresses or watch-towers—a curious bird note sounded somewhere not far distant.

The dogs instantly gave tongue, as if excited, and Maidie switched her pony, who broke into a canter, and Gregory set his steady horse to a trot, expecting to catch up his little charge very quickly when they reached the open. She often took a little spurt on her own account, and then came back to him, but when he got free of the wood she was some way ahead, and more than this, she was not the only rider in sight. Bearing down towards her were two other riders, whose faces looked oddly black and

unrecognisable. Gregory clapped his knees against his horse's sides and broke into a hand-gallop.

"That's Master Percy—I'd know his riding anywhere; and I suppose he's got Master Roddy with him. But wherever did they get them ponies? I don't know 'em—fine goers; but too wild—too wild! Bless my soul! They'll frighten Star, galloping up like that." And the old servant raised his voice in a shout of warning and admonition.

"Take care—take care, Master Percy! It isn't safe playing tricks like that! Missy, Missy! Don't you go along of them! Come back—there's a dear! It isn't safe for you!"

"I can't, Gregory—I can't!" came back the clear notes of the child's voice, shaking between excitement, laughter, and a delicious simulation of fear. "I'm being carried off by bushrangers! I can't come back to you!"

For a moment or two Gregory sought

to pursue; but the ponies swept along at a pace that altogether distanced him, and to his dismay, left the road, and began careering wildly over the rough stony moorland, as though making across country for some unknown destination. The old man knew that neither he nor his horse could ride in that helter-skelter fashion, and that any attempt at pursuit would only render the fugitives more reckless. He pulled up, rubbed his hot brow, and looked after them.

“She’ll be all safe with them, bless her! They think a sight on her—and so they ought. But Master Percy, he’s a bit too reckless. I hope he’ll take care of her. I suppose they’ll work round to that old mill, and spend the day there. She knew all about it, I’ll be bound—the little puss! That’s why she wanted me with her. She knew old Toby and his master couldn’t keep up with them once they started off like that!” Gregory could not but chuckle to himself at the “artfulness” of his little

lady. He was not in the least uneasy about her. The day was hot and cloudless ; there had been a long drought, and all was dry and warm above and below them. The children's parents encouraged them to be out all day long in such weather, and this was evidently some project which the youngsters had planned together.

Gregory rode home soberly, but quite happy about Maidie ; and when he told his tale to Nurse, she joined in the laugh at her darling's little bit of innocent cunning.

"I thought there was something in the wind to-day. Oh, yes, she will be all safe with them. They'll spend the day at the old mill, and they'll bring her back in the evening. If they keep her too late we shall know where to find her. Master Percy has a head on his shoulders. She will be safe enough with them."

Meanwhile Maidie, after a breathless gallop, with a sense of eluding a determined pursuit, drew rein at last, laughing and

breathless, to look back and see that Gregory had been altogether out-distanced.

“ Oh, isn't it lovely being carried off by brigands ! I wonder why anybody minds ! You dear boys, you did it beautifully. And how splendidly Roddy rides now ! Almost as well as Percy ! ”

“ Wish I did ! ” growled Roddy ; but he was evidently well pleased by the compliment.

“ He's getting along fine,” cut in Percy ; “ never thinks of wanting a saddle now ; and sticks on like a good 'un. Oh, we've been riding these two little beggars well since we got 'em up. They are almost as tame as dogs. We have 'em with us all day. That's the way to do the trick when one can. They don't feel lonely then, and they get to understand lots of things. Phew ! It's pretty hot ! I vote we make for that bit of wood, and laze about a bit. I don't guess they'll come here after us. If they go anywhere it'll be the mill. We'll have

a good time of it over yonder, and make for our crag when it begins to get a bit nearer evening. They'll not find us this side to-morrow, I'll be bound ! ”

Maidie clapped her hands in ecstasy.

“ And I shall have a night out of doors—a real camping-out night, like what we've talked about ! Oh, how delicious ! Tell me what your robber cave is like. Oh, I do want to see it so badly ! ”

“ So you shall, all in good time. It's a jolly place enough, but there's not much cave—only ledges of rock one can creep under. We were up there yesterday, and we collected leaves and moss to make us some beds, and brought a saucepan to boil water. We can make a fire if it's safe—if people aren't prospecting round after you ; and there'll be a jolly old moon all night. Oh, we shall be as jolly as sandboys up there, and you've got us a cake ? ”

“ Such a beauty ! I asked Cookie two days ago, and told her just what we liked

best. Oh, how lovely it's going to be! Now let's go into the wood, and be cool, and enjoy ourselves."

It was a charming place where they made their camp. A little brook rippled over its rocky bed, and Maidie must needs pull off her shoes and stockings and paddle in the warm dancing water. She soon divested herself of her riding-skirt, which on occasions like this she simply slipped over her holland frock, and was free to run about and enjoy herself at will.

The ponies were hobbled by Percy, in that clever way of his, and grazed near at hand, seeming to enjoy themselves as much as their riders. Maidie was delighted to note how tame and affectionate were the two little rough fellows, only just taken half-wild from the herd. Certainly Percy's power over animals was rather remarkable. They would come at his whistle, they would stand with pricked-up ears and eager faces, whilst he made noises to them, or whistled

his curious bird-notes. They made friends with the dogs, snuffing them all over, and jumping a little when Chico suddenly swerved nervously away, and then circled round with his tail in a funny curve, as he always put it when he wanted to play ; or when Pickle started barking furiously, and bounding about in his graceful, active way.

It was delicious to lie upon the soft moss, and watch the creatures at play ; to feel that they were quite alone in this little world of their own discovery, and that for one long glorious day at least there was to be no watching of the clock, no washing and dressing for meals—no undressing and going to bed even when night fell—but just to curl up in a delicious bed of leaves, like a dormouse, with the moon and stars overhead ! Maidie fairly hugged herself in delight over the thought, not able to consider, in the excitement of the adventure, whether there was not an element of disobedience in her conduct. True, she had been “ carried

away " in a spirited fashion, but she and her captors had planned it all out beforehand, and were now enjoying their adventure to the full.

Maidie would have known very well, had she cared to think about it, that her mother would not have sanctioned her sleeping out upon the crags—scarcely perhaps in the ruin itself ; but that was what they were bent on doing. It savoured of romance, and was dear to her heart. She called herself a prisoner, and dismissed the idea of being an accomplice.

It was all very delightful. They ate when they were hungry, drank from the brook when they were thirsty ; lay still and drowsed when it got very hot, and wandered onwards in desultory fashion when the sun began to wester.

The sky had become curious-looking, with a coppery tint, and the sun seemed to glare out of it like a huge flaming ball. The air was very, very still ; and the birds

had ceased to twitter. If the children and their attendant animals had not been making so much noise and chatter, the great stillness of the world of nature would have struck them.

“Where is our robber cave?” eagerly asked Maidie, as they came out from the wood, and she gazed about her. “And which is the way to the old mill?”

“The mill is over yonder; you follow the path by the brook; it joins the bigger stream just above. But we cut across to where you see those rocks rising up. Don’t they look jolly and grim in this coppery light? We’ll ride on, and you shall see. Whew! How hot it is! I wonder if we’re going to have a storm?”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be romantic!” cried Maidie. “I think storms always come when people get among brigands. Do let’s make haste! I want so much to see your cave. I’ve never been as far out over the moor as this—at least, not just in this part of it.”

Maidie was mounted now, and the boys leaped up on their saddleless steeds, who pranced about and tossed their heads and flourished their heels, but in a good-tempered fashion.

“They’ve no shoes on ; they won’t hurt anything,” spoke Percy. “I wonder if they’ll be able to scramble up the rocks ? I don’t think we’ll take Star. He’s shod. He’d better be left behind to find his own way home. But I think these little beggars can come. We’ve called them Rainbow and Starlight—after the bushranger and his horse in ‘Robbery under Arms,’ you know.”

Something in the electric condition of the air seemed to add excitement and a spice as of danger to the adventure now. Maidie experienced a delicious tremor of fear as she rode along towards the place where the rocks rose rugged and crag-like from the wild moorlands.

“I wonder if anybody is coming after me yet ? ” she cried, looking round the wide

expanse. "They might, you know, if the boys were to happen to come back early, or if Nurse got frightened. You don't think they'll catch us, do you?"

"I'll bet my bottom dollar they won't!" cried Percy, laughing. "They'll only go to the ruined mill, and when they don't find us they'll be jolly well stumped. They'll never think of this place. That's the scrumptious part of it. They'll run up and down, and holler and shout themselves hoarse; and we shall be lying snug and warm in our crannies all the time."

Maidie laughed gleefully. Her blood was up now. She was full of the glory and daring of being a captive—carried away by the robbers.

"You'll not let them get me, Percy?"

"They'd better try!" he answered with a gesture of menace; and Roddy uttered a loud whoop of defiance, while the dogs barked in wild excitement and sympathy.

"Here we are!" cried Percy, as they

reached the foot of the curious rising ground, that was all seamed and scored with strata of rock, and towered up almost like a precipice in Maidie's estimation. One face was almost precipitous ; but Percy knew where a steep and rugged path led upwards, and transferring Maidie's saddle and pack to his own pony, he let Star go free, to find his way home or graze along the moor, as he chose, whilst he made the attempt to get the other two ponies up the path to the robber haunt.

"Do we really want them up there?" asked Maidie doubtfully; but Roddy cut in with an eager :

"Of course, robbers always have their horses with them. Besides, if we let them go, we might never catch them again. We'll get them up, never fear."

It was part of the fun, seeing how the bold little fellows scrambled and climbed. They were really very clever. Star followed for a little way, but slipping on his shod

feet, grew frightened, and plunged downwards to the safer level of the plain below, where he neighed anxiously after his companions.

Maidie answered him, and told him he would be quite near them and quite safe, and watched with breathless interest the scramble up the rugged path.

“Why, how late it must be getting!” she suddenly exclaimed. “It seems almost dark. Roddy, what’s the time?”

“It’s clouds coming up. I think we are going to have a thunderstorm,” cried Roddy over his shoulders. “Come along, and let’s get all snug and ship-shape. For if it rains it’ll be a jolly good cat-and-dog affair, I expect; and we must squeeze in somewhere to get shelter.”

Maidie thought a storm fine fun, but rather wished it had not got so dark, and that the wind had not begun to blow so chill. She had only a thin cotton frock on, for it had been a very hot morning; and

these crags were a good bit more exposed than the garden at home.

For the moment she was hot with exercise, and the cool wind was rather refreshing ; but if it blew long it might make her cold, and she had only her riding skirt to wrap herself up in.

“ But we’ll make a fire in the cave, and have a lovely time,” she told herself, and at that moment Percy gave a welcome shout.

“ Here we are ! Here’s the plateau for the ponies. They’ll be right as a trivet here ; and we’ll find some nooks and crannies for ourselves out of the wind, if it gets up, and light our fire, and have a jolly old carouse with that cake of yours. Only, by Jove ! I believe we’ve forgotten to bring any water to make tea ! That’s a bit of a sell ! ”

“ I’m so thirsty, too,” said Maidie. “ We must have something to drink.”

“ Well, it’s going to rain—you’ll see ! ” cried Roddy eagerly. “ Then we’ll fill our

saucepan somehow. Oh, we'll get some tea, never fear. Cricky! Look there! That's something like a flash! And—— Oh my!"

It was useless for him to speak longer; the peal of thunder seemed to rend the sky above them. Maidie put her hands to her ears, terrified at the furious fusillade of heaven's artillery. For a moment she was frightened—wished herself at home. Then Percy's voice spoke—cool and reassuring.

"Come on, young 'un—no time to lose. I want you to pack up warm and snug before the rain comes. Here's just the place for you. Here—under this rock. I'll heap it full of leaves to make it soft. Wrap your skirt all round your shoulders, and I'll put the saddle over your legs. You'll be as right as rain then. And by gum! It's going to rain, too!"

Maidie gladly crept into the little hollow beneath the overhanging rock. It felt warm and snug with its bed of leaves and moss upon which the sun had been shining. Her

long skirt made a wrap for her head and shoulders, and the saddle was a famous shelter for the feet. Percy, always fertile in expedients, had her snugly tucked up in a very few minutes. Then came another fearful flash, another terrific roar—the flood-gates of the storm seemed to open upon them, and the rain descended in one solid mass of water.

“ Gracious ! ” exclaimed Percy, as another sound broke upon his ears. “ The ponies have stampeded and made off ! ”

CHAPTER XI.

NIGHT AND STORM.

“OH, Roddy, isn’t it romantic? It’s much more like real brigands, all dark like this, and with thunder and lightning. I’m not a bit afraid. Are you?”

“No; but I call it rather beastly. We can’t light our fire or anything, and you’ll be getting cold before long.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. I’ve got Chico hugged up in my arms, and he’s like a hot bottle. And Pickle’s snuggled in under the saddle, and is keeping my feet beautifully warm. Come in here, Roddy, do—closer in, and Col will make you warm. I wish Percy wouldn’t stop out like that. I’m sure he’s getting wet.”

“Oh, rain don’t hurt boys,” answered

Roddy ; “ and besides, he’s used to all sorts of things like this. Still, it’s no good getting soaked, as I told him ; but he’s a bit put out, and will do as he chooses.”

Roddy had been standing beside Maidie beneath the overhanging shelter of the rock ledge, and now he squatted down beside her, not sorry of the warm contact of Colin’s thick coat.

The dogs had been alarmed by the storm from the first, and had crept away into crevices and corners, so that luckily they were not wet ; and Maidie found it very comforting to hold Chico fast in her arms beneath the riding skirt wrapped about her, and to feel Pickle curled up in the region of her feet. If only it would stop raining, and the sky would clear of that heavy blanket of black cloud, it would be delicious, she kept assuring herself ; and even as it was, it was highly romantic to be up here on these crags in the middle of a big storm of thunder and lightning.

“What a jolly stew old Nurse will be in!” remarked Roddy, who was beginning to wish the adventure at Jericho.

“Oh, no, she won’t—not so very bad. She’ll think we’re all safe at the mill. She’ll be just a little unhappy, and a good bit vexed; but perhaps it’ll make things better in one way.”

“How?”

“Well, you see, very likely they’ll think it’s the storm that is keeping us from coming home. They’ll think we are waiting till it is over—which would be quite sensible. And if the rain doesn’t stop, perhaps they’ll think it will be best for us to stop where we are.”

“More likely they’ll send to fetch us all away, and when they don’t find us they’ll be in a pretty blue funk.”

“Oh, do you think so? I hope not. I don’t want Nurse to be frightened. She’s a dear old thing, though she does fuss. But anyhow, they can’t find us, can

they ? We shall have our night out, shan't we ? ”

Maidie's spirits were as yet high, and she was putting all her energies into the task of keeping up the heart of the party. She saw very well that the boys were anything but pleased at the turn things had taken, and she did not want them to worry about her. They had done this thing partly for her sake, and she was bent on looking upon it as a delightful experience. The lightning was less vivid now, and the thunder was growling and rolling away in the distance ; but the pitiless rain came pouring down in straight lashing bars, blotting out the prospect before them, dashing upon the crags and rocks, sending little rivulets foaming down a score of tiny channels into the plain below, and turning every little depression of the ground into a pool which grew bigger and deeper as they watched.

“ We've got plenty of water now ! ” cried Maidie gaily, though as she saw the
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rain trickling down in runnels from their overshadowing ledge, and making a wet rill all down the saddle, she began to wonder how long it would be possible to keep dry. "We can't boil our kettle, I suppose; but we might have something to eat, I think. How dark it's getting! I suppose it must be nearly night now. I do wish Percy would come! What *is* he doing?"

Roddy lifted up his voice and gave a coo-ee which brought Percy round to them, very wet and dirty and very hot.

"I say, old fellow, what *are* you doing? And why don't you come and shelter with us? You'll be sopped—you are sopped already. We want something to eat; where is the prog? Come along and be sociable, and let's make the best of a bad job. It's no use being grumpy about it. We can't help the storm——"

"All right—I know we can't; but if we've got to stop here all night, we've got to make things a bit comfortable for Maidie.

Just stop where you are, and leave me alone for a spell longer. The food's in our kitchen, Roddy. You can get what you want ; or if you care to wait just a little bit longer——”

“ Of course we'll wait. What are you doing, Percy ? ”

But Percy was gone already, and in a minute Roddy scrambled up and said :

“ I'd best go up and help him if I can. He's such a chap for ideas. We did begin to build a sort of shelter two days ago, but we got tired of it. I declare——”

Roddy was gone next, and Maidie was left alone, trying to persuade herself that it was all fine fun, but involuntarily turning in thought towards her cosy nurseries and a little white bed at home, and the plentiful and daintily served meal which would be awaiting her already.

Chico whined in her arms, and squirmed till he got his face free, and could lay his long yellow nose against her cheek, as though

to ask what his little mistress was doing in this odd and uncomfortable place at such an untoward hour and in such unwonted circumstances.

“Chico, dear, it’s an adventure,” explained Maidie, “and you must try and enjoy it. Adventures aren’t always just what we think they’re going to be—that’s the queer part about them. I suppose that’s why the grown-ups don’t like us to have them. But if only it hadn’t been for this storm it would all have been splendid ; and I think the storm makes it more romantic, though it is rather cold and uncomfortable. Pickle darling, are you getting wet, that you shiver so and whine like that ? Come along, and snug up between me and Col ; and we’ll keep you warm. It was so hot this morning, I can’t think how it manages to have got cold so soon ! ”

The three dogs and their little mistress huddled together for warmth, and Maidie talked to them and tried to assure both

herself and her companions that it was all fine fun ; but the boys were still out of sight, and the rain seemed to have settled into a steady, pitiless downpour. There was not a ray of light anywhere in the sky, and now the shades of night were settling down in earnest.

“ I hope I shan’t begin to cry ! ” Maidie found herself saying to herself. “ But it really is rather horrid ; and how could we possibly get home, even if we tried ? ”

Suddenly Percy appeared. He did not say anything, but he just gathered Maidie up in his arms, wrapped the riding skirt close about her, and made a sort of rush through the rain, whither she did not know, for he had covered up her head and all. When the covering was flung back, she gave a little cry of astonishment and delight.

“ Oh, Percy, what a lovely place ! ”

It was a queer little nook to be called by such a name ; but at least it afforded a

certain amount of shelter from the drenching rain, which was now blowing with a rising wind in slanting grey rods, and would soon have rendered Maidie's first refuge quite untenable.

Here was something approximating a cave. It was really a deep cleft between the rocks—something like the one where they pitched their tent the first time they went camping. The boys had done something towards building this out into a sort of hut—using boulders and slabs of stone for their purpose—when they had been up here before; but they had grown weary of the toil in the blazing sun, and had desisted; so that when they first arrived its roofless condition rendered it useless as a place of refuge. But Percy had been filled with what might be termed a “Berserker fury.” He felt that nothing was too hard for him to accomplish. There were great flat stones all about. Many of them lay about above the seam in the rocks which

formed the recess. Shoving and pushing, lifting and rolling, he got a sort of roof made, and stuffed the crannies with heather pulled up by arms-full, and with small stones and earth and sand—anything that he could sweep together. His hands were bleeding ; his clothes were torn ; he was soaked to the skin, and he was panting and overheated by his exertions ; but the shelter was made. It had a dry roof overhead, and the rocky sides gave protection from the wind. Roddy had shovelled out with their saucepan the water and wet sand from the floor. He followed now, bearing Maidie's saddle, which would make her a fairly comfortable and dry seat. They had even contrived to light a candle and set it on a ledge of rock. If only they could coax a little fire to burn, they would not be so badly off. But everything was sopping wet, and there seemed small hope of accomplishing anything in this direction. Still Maidie gazed round her with wondering and admiring

eyes, and the dogs crouched about her, thankful for the feel of walls about them, and the sense of some sort of roof over their heads.

“Oh, Percy, Percy, how clever you are! How snug and comfortable we shall be now!”

Comfort certainly goes by comparison. It would have seemed a dreary, dismal place enough at any other time, but by contrast from what Maidie had just left it seemed palatial.

Roddy was getting out the supper. Provisions were damp, but appetites were keen. The tinned milk had not suffered, and spread upon slices of cake was pronounced—delicious.

They had a number of ends of fat carriage candles, begged from the stables, and though lighting a fire was impossible, Percy carefully washed the saucepan, filled it with clear, clean rain-water, and after lighting several candles and setting them close

together upon the ground, he patiently held the saucepan over the flame, till the water, into which some tea had been thrown, was really quite respectably hot—hot enough to send a certain glow through their frames.

“It tastes like real bushranger tea!” cried Maidie, resolved to make the best of everything. “It is splendid having a bandit like you, Percy. You can manage everything!”

“You’re a plucky little kid—that’s what you are!” spoke Percy with admiration. “Most girls, long before this, would be howling for their home and their beds and their nurses.”

Maidie would not tell how near she had been to tears once. Her spirits had revived; and even the dogs, now well fed upon biscuit and scraps, had ceased their uneasy whinings, and lay in a sort of heap together, close beside their little mistress. They heard the rain beating down and the winds

howling ; but they were sheltered from the worst of it. It certainly was not warm ; they all sat near together—except that the boys would not let Maidie touch their wet clothes—to try and keep as warm as they could. Now and then little drips of rain came splashing down upon them, obliging them to move. And if these got bad, Percy always insisted upon going out and trying to find and stop the leak with a boulder or shale of rock.

The candle ends burnt dimly one by one. They were careful of them, because they did not want to be left in the dark. By eight o'clock Maidie thought that surely it must be nearly morning ; and when Roddy assured her that it was not really bed-time yet at home, she felt a curious sinking at heart.

“ If only this rain would stop, or get less anyhow, I'd go back for help ! ” spoke Percy, suddenly, in the dimness. “ But I can't get down in the dark. It was either

the rain or the lightning. I think that little fir sapling was struck, and has torn it all away. I went down to look. Something's happened. I can't get down without some light——”

“ Oh, don't go—don't leave us, Percy ! ” cried Maidie, stretching out her hand to him. “ It would be dreadful without you ; and you'd get hurted and killed perhaps. Don't go. Let's all stop together ; it'll come morning presently. And perhaps they'll send and seek us and find us.”

Percy would not say anything, but he saw little hope of being found by any search party sent out from Beech Hurst. If they could have lighted a fire, and if the rain were not so blinding, there might have been a chance of signalling ; but as things were it was out of the question. If only Maidie could sleep for a few hours whilst the night wore away ! With the first grey of the morning Percy was resolved to be up and off. He bitterly reproached himself

for ever planning this reckless enterprise. He knew perfectly that the motive at the bottom of his resolve had been a little bit of hurt pride and obstinacy because Rex had interfered with his plans once before. Maidie's love of adventure had been the excuse ; but he knew that in his own heart he had wanted to show Rex and Ronald that he was not going to be " rule-ridden " as they were, and that he was not going to be thwarted by them.

Then again, he realised that if only he had shown more perseverance there would have been a snug little shelter, and plenty of dry furze and wood to make a fire with up here for their night camp. He and Roddy had worked pretty hard for a few hours at this shelter, but, as usual, had left their task incomplete ; and had contented themselves by saying that it was too fine and hot to want anything more, and that there was plenty of time to finish another day. So that when they had brought Maidie

there in the downpour, Percy acutely realised that nothing was fit for her reception ; and that the ledge of rock gave more protection at the first than the projected robber cave.

“ I’m a beast—a horrid, lazy young brute ! ” he said to himself as he looked at the lightly-clad little girl, shivering in spite of herself, and looking wan and weary as she leaned back with closed eyes against the hard wall of rock, uncomfortably perched upon her saddle out of the wet. “ Roddy kept saying that we ought to get a few rugs or something up here for Maidie, and I always put it off, or thought it didn’t matter. They’d have been soaked certainly if they’d been here ; but then if we’d got the stones heaped up for the roof—— ”

He ground his teeth and felt as though he would willingly have flogged himself. Roddy had begun to snore, lying stretched upon the ground beside Col, whose warm

back he used as a pillow. Maidie was sleeping in snatches, looking wretchedly uncomfortable, but always smiling at him when she opened her eyes and realised what was happening.

“I declare if she’d cry like other kids I could stand it better,” thought Percy, who was too wet even to try and make her comfortable against his shoulder, as he longed to do. He felt he would have sacrificed his right hand cheerfully for a good fire and some hot blankets in which to wrap the little girl.

“She’ll get a chill ; she’ll be ill—perhaps she’ll die !” he thought, as the night wore on. “And she’s the only girl-kid they’ve got, and they think all the world of her—and no wonder. And they’ve taken me in and been like sort of parents to me—and this is the way I’ve served them !”

Percy groaned aloud, not knowing that the sound was audible. Maidie opened her eyes with a little start.

“Oh, Percy,” she said, “we’ve never said our prayers. It’s so funny up here, and not going to bed. But God can hear us just the same. Shall we say them now? Shall we—shall we? You don’t mind, do you? I’d like it so very much. But I should like somebody to come for us now. Shall we just ask Him to send somebody?”

Maidie, stiff and queer with her constrained position, knelt down, and Percy willingly knelt beside her. Never had he felt so helpless in his life before—never understood before so clearly the longing for help outside of himself.

Maidie’s weary little face looked happier when she rose from her knees.

“I’m so sleepy,” she said. “I think I’ll sleep a lot now. And it will soon be morning, won’t it, Percy? And then they will come and fetch us.”

She never doubted but that it would be so, and Percy set his teeth and vowed

she should not be disappointed. The child settled herself down more comfortably, with her head on the saddle and Chico in her arms. The floor was damp, but Percy tucked her well up in the riding skirt upon which she lay, and hoped for the best. The rain was less heavy now ; he thought at dawn it would cease. But whether or not, with the first grey in the eastern sky he was going to make for Beech Hurst. He would not even have waited for that had he not feared that if he came to grief in the descent, or lost his way in the pitchy blackness of the storm, help would be longer than ever in coming.

He could almost have shouted for joy when, on stepping out from the shelter at length, he saw that the eastern sky was growing softly grey. He stood watching, till the night began just to lift about him. Things that had been dark blurs of blackness, took form and shape. A bird suddenly began to sing ; a tiny glow as of shell

pink showed in the sky ; the rain had ceased to fall, though everything was sop-ping and dropping.

Percy gave one look within—Maidie and Roddy still slept. Pickle was awake, and came creeping to him, but Chico and Col, though their eyes were open, never moved.

Next moment Percy was out in the keen clear coldness of the approaching dawn, and was scrambling downwards over a half obliterated, slippery and rather perilous path, towards the moor, lying dark and glistening beneath him. Once he tripped and rolled. It was still dim, and he was stiff and numb. A sharp thrill of pain shot up his leg ; it hurt him now to run ; but he set his teeth and swung himself over obstacles, rolling more than once as he tried to find footing in the shifting mass of stone and secure sand.

Pickle was leaping downwards, barking joyfully. A whinnying sound seemed to give answer.

“It’s Star!” cried Percy, as he reached the level of the plain, catching his breath with pain. “Good! I’ll do the rest easy now,” and so saying, he caught the pony, vaulted on his back, and started off at a gallop for Beech Hurst.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

PERCY'S face was crimson. His eyes were full of tears. He had to gulp down a big lump in his throat before he could get out any words at all. and then they came with a rush.

“ Oh, Lady Madeline—please, please don't go on talking like that. You make me so awfully ashamed ! I'd like to creep into a rat-hole and pull it down after me ! Don't you understand that it was all my fault from beginning to end——”

“ My dear boy, I have just been telling you that the doctor says it was your doing—your cleverness in contriving a shelter, and your pluck in getting back with a hurt ankle at daybreak, that saved our darling

from very much worse consequences. He is not at all anxious about her as it is. She has a feverish cold, but she is sleeping soundly now, and is in a nice healthy glow after her bath ; and she has enjoyed her milk and beef-tea. She will have to stop in bed for a few days—perhaps for a week ; but had it not been for you——”

Percy sat up, flushed and hot. He, too, was in bed, with a bandaged foot and ankle that gave twinges when he moved too vehemently ; but in other respects he felt nothing but a certain amount of stiffness and fatigue.

“Lady Madeline, please don’t make me feel such an awful humbug ! It’s like this—if it hadn’t been for me, it would never have happened at all.”

“Ah, well, you aided and abetted my adventurous little maiden, but she was bent upon the escapade herself—she has told me all about it. She has all her life been longing for a night out of doors.

Poor darling ! I don't think she will want another."

" Lady Madeline, please listen. Of course Maidie wanted that—all kids do. But she'd never have really cared about it if I hadn't always been gassing about camping and all the things I could do. I wanted to show off ; I wanted them all to see what a fine fellow I was, and that Australian boys could beat English ones—and all that rot. Then when Rex and Ronald came, and I saw what they were like, I was a bit mad. I felt I wasn't a bit better than they were."

" Perhaps not, Percy ; boys are made differently. You were good at some things and my boys at others. The best thing is not to try and be rivals, but friends and comrades, learning from one another."

" Yes, that's just it. I wanted to show off to them, but I was lots too stuck-up to think I could learn from them. I could see there was something about Rex and Ron that I hadn't got, but it put my dander up.

I only wanted to make them 'sing small,' as I called it; and as I'd been brought up with horses and camps and things, I was all for showing off." And Percy plunged headlong into the story of the first camp, and the ponies, and how Rex had interposed when he knew what was going on, and how Percy had resolved to get his own way again by hook or by crook.

Lady Madeline looked a little pale and a little grave as she heard the tale. Not only had Percy done a good deal that was risky, but he had led Roddy with him into recklessness and disregard of his parents' wishes. Whilst the tale was being told, Roddy slipped into the room, looking only a little pale and heavy-eyed from the effects of last night's adventure. He had only just seen his mother upon her hasty arrival—summoned by a wire from Rex sent overnight, when the children had not appeared, and delivered to her first thing the following morning. He was not ashamed now to fling

his arms about her in a big hug, and hearing the tale Percy was pouring out—not sparing himself, but taking the whole burden of blame upon his shoulders, he began to put in his word.

“It was rather beastly of us, Mother, but it was such larks! Oh, yes, we did know—at least, I knew—that Daddy would not have let us do it, unless there were grooms or people to take care of us and lend a hand; but that would have spoilt it all. And really it has taught me to ride; and the ponies Percy chose out for us last time were jolly little beggars, and he made them so awfully tame, talking and whistling to them, and feeding them, and handling them—I wish you could have seen him at it!”

“Oh, bother!” ejaculated Percy almost crossly. “Don’t be a young rotter, Roddy. I just want your mother to understand what a fearful brute I’ve been! Coming here because she was good enough to

bring me, and then sky-larking like this, when I knew Sir Reginald wouldn't have allowed it; and leading Maidie into mischief."

"Oh, come! Miss Maidie was spoiling for a spree!" broke in Roddy.

"Yes, but it was I who put her up to it—perhaps she doesn't know it herself, but I do. And when that storm came on, and I knew we were in for it—couldn't get away that night—and she such a plucky little thing, but delicate, sort of frail, like a white flower——"

Percy almost choked again. Lady Madeline knew it—the mother-heart in her estimated the force of the wave sweeping over him. She stretched out a hand and laid it gently on his head.

"Well, you worked like a Trojan, and I never knew how you did it—getting all those stones rolled over the crack and roofing it in. You didn't even call me——"

"Never mind all that now, Roddy,"

said Lady Madeline gently. "That belongs to the past. We will not talk about it any more. God was very good to my darling. She has not suffered more than just enough to teach her a lesson. You boys have had a lesson, too. I think you will none of you forget that part of it; but we will not always be talking or thinking of the rest. It was an adventure, and it has ended without serious mishap. Another time, when some wild idea seizes hold of you, and you want to go your own way without thinking enough of what Father and Mother would say, then you will remember the thunderstorm on the crag, and the night you spent there, and think that perhaps the grown-up folks do know rather better than the little ones what is good for little people."

"Only, Mummy, if it hadn't been for the storm——"

"Ah, yes, Roddy, then things would have gone off better, no doubt; but all the same, I think Maidie would have very

likely taken cold. Little girls used to snug, soft beds do not find rocky ones a comfortable exchange, and after hot days the air almost always grows chill at night up on those high moorland places. That is what boys do not think of ; we do not expect old heads upon young shoulders. What we expect is that the young head should not be too headstrong ! We expect our children to let their parents judge for them, not to take the bit in their teeth and bolt away off, like a pair of unbroken ponies." And the lady looked smilingly into the downcast faces of the two boys, who were realising that, after all, it was not so "poor-spirited" as Percy had inwardly dubbed it, to accept the experience and the wisdom of the older generation, as Rex and Ronald were willing to do.

"But you'll forgive me, Lady Madeline ?" pleaded Percy ; and she bent over him and kissed him tenderly.

"Dear boy, I forgive you, and I thank

you for your goodness and tenderness to my little girl. Maidie has told me all about it. If you led her into the scrape, as you think, she is equally confident that she led you ! We will not be careful to apportion the blame ; we will forget it. Little folks are apt to be rash ; but they learn their lessons in time. And now, if you could get a quiet sleep, Percy, that would be the best thing for you ; and if I leave this comfortable armchair for Roddy, I dare say he will snooze beside you."

Percy, with a mind relieved of the weight which lay upon it, was soon fast asleep, and Roddy also. They slept most of that day and all the next night, and woke up feeling none the worse for their adventure, save that Percy's ankle was stiff and rather swollen, and he had to hop about instead of walking.

A stolen visit to Maidie's bedside showed her fast asleep amongst her pillows. She had been a little feverish in the night, dream-

ing of storms and rain, and clattering ponies running about her room. But now she was sleeping healthfully and soundly, with a soft moisture on her skin, and even old Nurse, who was something of a fidget where her darling was concerned, declared that she would wake up almost well.

Outside her room Percy gripped Roddy by the shoulders.

“I say, Rod, you and I are just going to get all those things done for Maidie that we began for her birthday, and never finished—lazy young brutes that we were!”

“All right!” answered Roddy with alacrity. “There’s everything up in the attic waiting. We’ll start straight off——”

“Yes, and we’ll jolly well do more than start this show!” cried Percy with vehemence. “We’ll start and we’ll plod on, and we’ll finish—if we have to work night and day we will! I don’t wonder they rotted me at home. Percy Vere—how I hated

the sound of my name ! I used to ask my mother whatever had made them give me such a beastly one. But I'm not going to hate it any more. I can see it jolly well now. Fellows who never stick to anything aren't worth their salt. If we'd just settled to the grind of getting that shelter made, and a hearth and wood and furze ready, and brought up rugs and things—why, how different it would all have been ! Oh, it was my fault. You were game for it ; but I voted it a fag, and that it was nonsense for one night to take all that grind. I pretended that it was ridiculous for brigands to have luxurious caves ; but all the time it was only because I didn't want to be bothered. I wanted just to swagger about on the ponies, and show Maidie and the other fellows what we could do. I never cared to be bothered over things that were a trouble. Come along, Rod. We'll grind away now ! ”

They made their way to the play-room,

and up to the attic. Percy could sit tailor fashion on the floor with the sections of the dolls'-house before him, and the furniture they had got together to make or mend. Roddy ran hither and thither, fetching what was wanted, setting on the glue-pot over the little oil-stove, and assisting Percy whenever he wanted another pair of hands.

The interior painting having been done, in several coats, which had now hardened capitally, the house did not take long to put together, and Percy's carpentering skill was considerable. He knew how to use tools to the best advantage, and his work was neat and deft. It wanted a good deal of patience when it came to the more "finnikin" task of repairing broken dolls' furniture, and Percy took up several odds and ends which he secretly longed to cast away in scorn, as not worth the trouble of mending. But when the thought came to him, he thrust it away resolutely.

"Very likely it ain't worth the doing,

but you've got to do it all the same, Percy Vere," he would say, apostrophising himself, "just to show you can do something you don't like—to teach you a lesson you badly want."

And really, when he put his heart to the task, he found that there was interest in everything—even the most "finnikin" jobs. And when the array of neatly glued and nailed and mended house-furniture stood on the window-seat before him, ready to be put in place next day when all was dry and hard, he felt a glow of satisfaction come over him, whilst Roddy danced a sort of war-dance up and down the room and cried :

"I say, won't Maidie just shriek for joy! She loves her dolls'-house and dolls' things, only they have been in the hospital or in a bad state so long, she'd not had much fun out of them. When we all of us go to school next month, she'll be jolly glad to have them back."

Next day they started at the rabbit-hutch. That was a piece of work more to Percy's liking, and a good deal had been done already; but he had shirked the more fidgety task of putting in wires, and adjusting the doors and slides. Now he and Roddy set to work upon that, and by time the evening came all was done, and one coat of paint put on.

"We must leave it two days, then give it another coat and some varnish. And now, how about that great kite? Would Maidie care about flying it if we finished it?"

"I expect she would, when it gets windy, but the tail would be rather a nuisance."

"All the more reason for doing it!" spoke Percy, with a sudden, almost martial, severity; and Roddy grinned and submitted. So the big kite was finished in due course.

All this sort of thing was very good for Percy's sprained foot; and the doctor was

surprised that it mended and strengthened so quickly. By the time the fourth day had come he felt very little inconvenience from the strain, and was allowed to go out of doors upon the condition of not doing too much walking or running.

“ Oh, no, I want to be busy. I shall only be standing about,” answered Percy. And as soon as ever the daily visit to Maidie had been paid after breakfast, they started off straight to the outside aviary, which had been left half finished, but which they were resolved should be not only finished, but inhabited by her hardier pet birds before she was up and out again.

Maidie was much better, but the cold was still somewhat heavy, and she kept rather weak and tired, so that she did not mind lying still in bed a good part of the day, and only sitting up for a while by the window in her little flannel gown whilst the bed was made cool and comfortable for the night. Rex and Ronald generally

visited her then, as Percy and Roddy did in the mornings ; but she was kept quiet for the most part, and slept a good deal ; so that the days did not pass slowly, and she found it hard to believe how much time had passed since the incident of the thunderstorm and the crag.

Rex and Ronald found the two younger boys hard at work over the aviary, and Rex exclaimed :

“ What a jolly place ! And how well you’re making it ! Can’t we lend a hand ? ”

Percy had felt just a little shy with Rex these past days, and had not seen much of him. He felt as though Rex must know the feelings he had cherished towards him, of which he was now heartily ashamed. But if this were so, the bigger boy showed no sign of it now.

“ Let’s all work together,” he said ; “ and I say, if we could make part of it solid, so as to give the birds a good shelter at night, where they could be shut in,

snug and warm, Maidie could keep quite a family of them out here for the best part of the summer. And we might go across later into Writlington and get her a few new ones. I always want to open the doors of some of those tiny cages in the shops, and let the poor little beggars loose. Why, in a place like this, they would feel themselves in a palace, after a dungeon-cell."

All four boys worked with a will. The aviary was to be rustic in character, so that paint was not wanted.

"We can give it a coat of creasote later, when the autumn comes and the birds have gone in, to keep it from rotting," Rex said. But now they worked away with natural wood, wire-netting, cross-pieces and board for roof and partition wall; and soon the place became not only larger than had originally been planned, but altogether more picturesque and attractive. There was a branching tree set in the middle, which

still held leaves amid its twigs, and where the birds could perch and fly and make believe they were out in the open. There were perches set this way and that, and within the covered portion there were more perches, feeding-boxes and drinking-troughs, and a big bath with water where those who wanted could splash about.

That afternoon, all being finished—for many hands make light labour, and the carpenter himself had come to see what was going on, and to put some strong and skilful finishing touches—the boys went over to the town, two on bicycles, and Percy and Roddy in the pony-cart, and brought back with them several new birds of a hardy sort, who would delight in the life of the aviary; and when these were put in with some of Maidie's favourites they made quite a goodly show, and fluttered joyously about in their commodious quarters, delighting themselves there so much that it was a pleasure to watch them.

Lady Madeline came up as the boys were thus engaged, and laid a hand on Percy's shoulder.

"Is this one of the birthday ideas brought to completion? How pleased Maidie will be!"

"We all did this—it isn't me only," cried Percy.

"But you'd done a lot before, and it was your idea," spoke Ronald.

"Oh, and, Mother, do come and look at the other things we've finished!" cried Roddy, pulling at Lady Madeline's hand; and she smilingly answered:

"Suppose we all go together, and take Maidie with us? Oh, yes; the doctor has been, and Maidie is up and dressed, and ready for anything that turns up. She has been asking for the boys. Let us go in to her and show her what you have for her indoors to-day; and the new aviary can wait for to-morrow."

Maidie was waiting for them in her

nursery—dressed and looking quite herself, except that some of her roses had turned from red to pink, as her father told her playfully.

“Come along, Maidie ; we’ve ever such a lot to show you !” cried Roddy, and drew her up the narrow stairway which led to the attic.

“We meant to bring them down to the nursery, but we’ll do that to-morrow. Here you are, Maidie ! Here’s your doll’s-house, and a rabbit-hutch, and a big kite ; and they ought to have been done for your birthday, only we were too lazy. But there they are, all ready for you now !”

Maidie’s eyes were shining like stars. She fell on her knees before her lovely doll’s-house, where everything stood in order in the delicately decorated and renovated rooms. Then she gazed at the hutch, with its contrivances of sliding doors, and at the big kite leaning know-

ingly against the wall; and, jumping suddenly up, she flung her arms round Percy's neck.

“It was you—it was you! I know it was you. You do have such lovely ideas! And—oh, Mummy, isn't he a dear, good, kind boy? And nobody can ever say any more that Percy Vere doesn't know how to persevere—can they?”





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